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MAD MARRIAGE

By GEORGE GIBBS

M A D M A R R I A G E
SACKCLOTH AND SCARLET
THE LOVE OF MONSIEUR
HOW TO STAY MARRIED
THE HOUSE OF MOHUN
YOUTH TRIUMPHANT
FIRES OF AMBITION
THE VAGRANT DUKE
THE GOLDEN BOUGH
THE YELLOW DOVE
M A D C A P
TONY'S WIFE
THE BLACK STONE
THE BOLTED DOOR
PARADISE GARDEN
THE SILENT BATTLE
THE FLAMING SWORD
THE FORBIDDEN WAY
THE SECRET WITNESS
THE MEDUSA EMERALD
THE SPLENDID OUTCAST
THE MAKER OF OPPORTUNITIES

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BY

GEORGE GIBBS

AUTHOR OF "THE LOVE OF MONSIEUR," "SACKCLOTH
AND SCARLET," "THE YELLOW DOVE," ETC.



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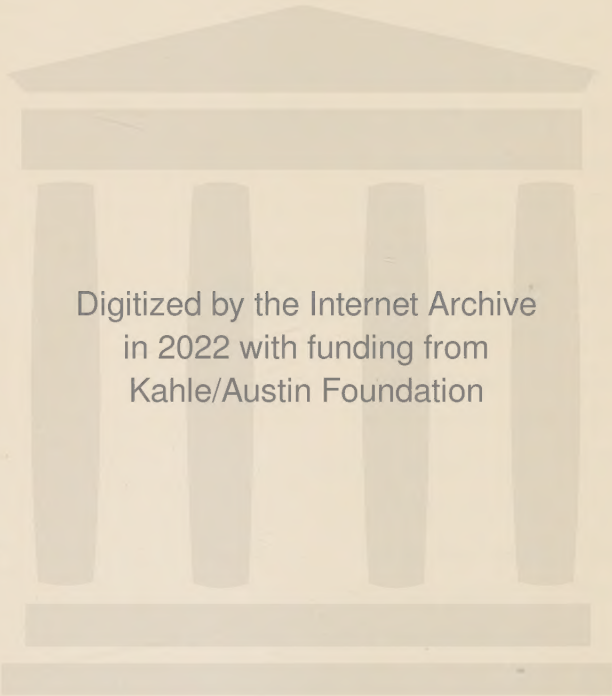
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MAD MARRIAGE

CHAPTER I

THE STRAY

IF you go upstream following the windings of the Delaware past the tidewater cities, you will come at last to a country of orchards and farm lands with pretty villages tucked comfortably into the folds of wooded hills. And between tall ledges of rock that jut out into the river, a streak of silver in the sunlight shows where the stream is swift in the shallows. A country of blue and green and gold with deft touches of scarlet or cadmium here and there between the trees where the barns and farmhouses make lively notes of color on the slopes of the western hills above the canal.

The serenity and beauty of this spot have made the valley the home of a group of landscape painters who live along the river bank, content with the simple joy of reproducing as they can the effect of the changing seasons upon familiar scenes—the screen of orchard blossoms with the bright blue river and delicate purple of the hills beyond, the haze of summer, the kaleidoscope of autumn, the fogs and the snows upon the hills; but always the river, sometimes blue, or green, or a shimmer of gold but often a sullen gray, mauve, or a tragic black against the snow.

It is the moment, very definite in its meanings, between winter and spring that is most beloved by the painter of

the Delaware Valley, for nature, still stripped to its bare anatomy, shows the warming tints of the growing year, the purple buds, the young shoots of pale yellow with the river growing bluer beyond. The snow has not all disappeared but there is a breath of warmth in the air and larger patches of green are beginning to show in sunny places.

This was the season best understood and interpreted by Frederick Wingate. He had worked hard all day on a large canvas, completing it in seven hours out of doors with his vigorous genius, the admiration and despair of all those who emulated him. That canvas, a thirty-six by forty-eight, with easel and painting kit, was piled in the back of his Ford car which followed a lane to a wooden bridge over the canal, and descended to a smaller bridge to an island in the river. Here Wingate lifted his massive frame to the ground—a man over fifty, red of face from his life in the open, and now, bundled in his faded sweaters, muddy arctics and slouch hat, more like a farmer than the favorite of fortune that he was, the holder of dozens of medals and prizes in all the cultured cities, with pictures in almost every famous collection of modern paintings in the world.

He was tired from his long stand in the mud and slush of the open field where he had been working, for the splendid joy of creation had given way to the inevitable reaction and his limbs were stiff and sore. But he was pleased with what he had done and his large nature expanded to the thought of a visit to the island where he might by criticism or advice be able to help this fellow Peter Randle who had worked so hard and with such small success.

Poor old Peter—so helpless in the practical affairs of life that an island was indeed the proper place for him. A dreamer lost in his dreams; a lover of beauty inadequate to portray it. Curious how badly he sometimes painted—a man who so craved the capacity for expression. He tried too hard—that was it. Painting was the only thing he was practical in—painting. Good Lord! that needed the very abstractions he gave to everything else. He might paint some day. He *might*. Wingate had painted badly once. Wingate wanted to help him. He couldn't remember when he had wanted to help anybody more. It was like helping a child or a woman—to help Peter. But Peter didn't know how childlike he was. He would have resented this thought of his dependence in the master's mind for he rather fancied himself as a helper of others. He had opinions and a spirit, too, if it came to that. It mattered little that his opinions were usually wrong and that his spirit rose at purposeless moments—they were still evidences of his definiteness in wrong directions. A misfit philosopher, you might say, playing at skittles among the great truths of life.

Wingate knew a little of his history from what Peter had told him and guessed at the rest. A failure at college—naturally—since with his faculty for doing the wrong thing, he had chosen a scientific instead of an academic course. The crowning event of his career had come when he had taken issue with one of the lesser instructors in biology upon the origin of the species. In the presence of a hundred students he rose in his place in the lecture room and defended in an impassioned voice the beauty and poetry of the story of Adam and Eve and repudiated in toto his textbooks, his instructor, the department of

biology, Herbert Spencer, and all their works. He was listened to with amazement and received a last-group marking at the end of his term. Wingate gathered that Peter hadn't exactly failed at the University. It was the University that had failed. It hadn't measured up to Peter's specifications.

Peter's father, who in life had denied him everything, now died leaving him a considerable fortune which Peter, bewildered by affluence, proceeded to invest in every wild-cat scheme that was brought to his attention or to give to any Tom, Dick or Harry who asked him for any part of it. His relatives, alarmed at this too definite evidence of his altruism, persuaded him to put his fortune into the hands of the family lawyer who could be expected to administer his affairs with reason tempered very mildly with mercy. To this Peter, who by this time was at the point of distraction from the many calls upon him, reluctantly consented, and after three years in Paris, where was born and nurtured in him the germ of art, retired to the immunity of his island in the Delaware where he might paint and dream unmolested.

This then, was Peter at the age of thirty-two, a thwarted altruist with a passion for cinnamon buns! If Wingate hadn't liked the fellow so well, he would have let him and his art go to the devil. But he was worth helping and he needed help. You couldn't turn a man down when he needed you as badly as Peter Randle did. Especially as Peter Randle would have cut off his right hand if he thought he could really help anybody by doing so.

As Wingate came near to the house he was greeted by a loud chorus of barking dogs, from the yapping treble of terriers to the bass of larger breeds. At the angle of

the first building they met him—beagles, spaniels, collies, airedales, police dogs, some of them showing faint traces of good lineage, but most of them just—dogs. At Wingate's determined aspect and after a kick of one of his heavy boots at the most vociferous of the smaller animals, which retreated yelping dismally, the chorus ceased, tails wagged, and he was conducted with the definite formalities of dogdom toward the house. As he approached he saw a woman sitting upon a bench in the sun. Wingate examined her curiously, but at the same moment a man came from the woodpile where he had been working. Peter Randle was tall and slender with a brown shock of hair, and eyes which seemed a bright blue in the deep tan of his face. He wore at this moment, a two-weeks growth of tawny beard, which gave him the appearance of an amiable burglar.

The two men shook hands.

"Mary said you were up at the house," Wingate began. "You wanted to see me, Peter?"

"Why, yes I—I did, Wingate," he said with an air of surprise as though delighted at the visitor's skill in solving some enigma. "But I—I didn't want you to come out of your way."

"Oh, I like to come here, Peter. Maybe I'd like it better if I were sure I wouldn't be torn to bits by your menagerie." He gazed around at the squatting circle of assorted dog flesh. "There must be a thousand of 'em."

Peter looked the animals over soberly as though trying hard to reconcile the statement to the facts.

"No, only seventeen, Wingate," he said, his smile breaking slowly. "Three more strays drifted in last week and I couldn't seem to send 'em away." He bent over and

lifted up a little lame fox terrier that had been fawning at his feet. "Poor little devil! He was just skin and bones. But he's picked up already. We're all a happy family. The first one that starts a scrap goes into the river, and it's cold now. They understand."

They seemed to, for at the sound of his voice a dozen muzzles were raised toward him and a dozen tails wagged in unison. Peter Randle looked at them in a friendly way, as though to compensate for his lack of a tail to wag in sympathy.

Wingate, who was tired, grew bored. "Well—?" he said.

"Oh, yes," said Peter. "We'd better go into the studio. I think there's a fire there. There ought to be. And you'll want a drink."

Instead of replying to this delightful suggestion Wingate jerked a thumb toward the other side of the house.

"And the woman?" he asked directly, after his custom. "Is she a stray, too?"

Peter's face suddenly ceased to radiate. He stared blankly at his visitor and then frowned at his muddy boots, speaking slowly—"Her name is Josie Brant. I'll speak about her after a while," he said, and then led the way to the studio.

"Well, you do beat the devil," muttered Wingate half to himself as he followed.

It was just a farmhouse, simply furnished, and a passage and a pair of steps from the dining room led up to the loft of the reconstructed barn that served as a studio. There was a skylight to the north, an open fireplace in which some logs were burning, two or three comfortable

chairs, a table, some easels, and stacks of canvases and frames of various sizes piled around the walls.

Wingate's host closed the outside door with the sudden gusty haste of one brought face to face with opportunity, took from the cupboard a bottle of Scotch, some glasses, and drew a pitcher of water from the tap. The men sat and drank. It was a good moment, an intimate moment, even, for Peter had already received tokens of the rugged friendship of his visitor and Wingate had suffered too long the early agonies of his own professional sincerity not to understand the difficulties that were standing in the way of Peter's success. Wingate pitied him a little for his amiable weaknesses, but did not deny a groping talent, though it still stooped to small sincerities when it might have given itself to large ones.

"Let's see your work," he growled. It was the gruff manner he always used to hide the fineness of his culture and of his spirit.

Peter blinked at the light, shoved an easel forward and timidly brought his canvases out one by one so that the visitor could see them. A short word of praise here, of criticism there, a comment upon form, another upon design and then, after the pictures had all been shown, a long silence, when the visitor reached for the bottle and filled his pipe.

"The trouble is, Peter," he said slowly at last, "that you're painting things instead of the meanings of things. You're painting forms instead of the light that's upon them and around them. There's nothing much wrong with your color. It's not *my* color, but I wouldn't want it to be, because then it wouldn't be yours. You draw well—almost too damn well. That makes you miss the

big things—the light, the air, the sense of envelopment and the unimportance of the little things . . . you’ve gotten to ‘niggling’ again lately—painting from your knuckles instead of from your spinal column. . . .”

“I know it,” said Randle, warmly, “but I get interested—er—in spite of myself—in the little things. They *are* beautiful, you know,” he added softly.

“Yes. Like that mangy fox terrier pup. But a mere detail in the Great Scheme.” Wingate rose and stamped across the floor. “Damn it, man, you’re not a pre-Raphaelite or even a Florentine. You’re living in nineteen twenty-four with acres of canvas behind you that those fellows never saw.”

He stopped abruptly and turned.

“How long have you been here now?”

“Er—I don’t know. Two years. Maybe three.”

“Without ever leaving Red Bridge?”

“Oh, I’ve been to New York on business and to Philadelphia for the picture shows—”

“That’s what’s the matter,” announced Wingate, vociferously. “You’re stodgy. You’re getting set. You’re getting ideas stuck crosswise in your head that won’t jar loose. You ought to get out of this for a while, away from the studio. To tell the truth, I’d say a bit of ‘jazz’ wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Good God!” gasped Randle, staring helplessly.

“I mean it. Jazz, women, a few weeks of irresponsibility away from this island and these damn dogs. You’ve got to go about to replenish your store of life. I do. You need new color on your palette, new form, sound, feeling. . . .” The bluff visitor clapped the younger man heartily on the shoulder. “The very thing! I’m going

over to New York next week to give my own ideas a good joggling. I have to do it once in a while. Come along. A round of the galleries, a joy party or so will be just the thing for you."

The bewildered Randle struck a match for his empty pipe and then stood staring through the skylight until the flame burnt his fingers. "I'm afraid," he said, awakening, "that I won't be able to go with you—at least, not now."

Wingate faced him, frowning. "Why not?" he growled. And then, as Peter slowly met his gaze, "Oh, I see," he said with a shrug of his shoulder toward the door, "this new responsibility!"

Peter smiled at his empty pipe.

"I see you've guessed it."

"How could I help guessing? A woman in your household—a strange woman—I know everybody in Red Bridge—"

Peter Randle groped for the tobacco. "Why—I suppose I might as well tell you the truth. It's only a question of time when everybody will know. I found her on the towpath without an umbrella in that heavy rain night before last. She was standing by the canal looking at the water. She was crying. I didn't like the looks of things."

"Tears!" muttered Wingate in contempt.

Peter glanced at him and went on. "She had come all the way from Milestown and was looking for a woman, her cousin, she said—Mrs. Cathcart—Will Cathcart's wife, used to live in the yellow house by the crossroads."

"She left Red Bridge over a year ago."

"Yes, I know it. But the girl didn't know it until she got here. She's going to have a baby. She was badly

scared. No money to speak of and wet to the skin. What could I do? What would anybody do? I brought her in here of course."

Wingate frowned. "And now that you've got her here, what are you going to do with her?"

"I don't know. I couldn't let her die of pneumonia, could I?"

"A baby. H—m. Where's her husband?" asked Wingate gruffly.

Peter frowned and blinked.

"I don't know."

"Why don't you know?"

"It's—it's none of my business."

"Oh, isn't it," growled Wingate.

"No," said Peter, frowning. "Why should it be. She's my guest. She's been helping Martha with the cooking and the chores. She seems to be a nice little thing."

"She seems to be," growled Wingate, ironically. And then—"You don't mean to tell me that you're going to let her stay on here?"

"Yes. Of course I am. Anybody would. You wouldn't have me turn her out, would you—with no money and no place to go?"

"But don't you realize what these people in Red Bridge will say about you?"

Peter raised his head, his eyes blinking rapidly.

"No—what?"

"That the baby is yours, of course."

"Oh!" said Peter, his blue eyes wide. "Do you think so?"

"Of course."

Peter stared a long moment. Then his eyes blinked again.

"Why, I hadn't thought of that," he said after a moment. "But it isn't, Wingate. I never saw the girl before. And if they're going to talk I don't see how the devil I can stop 'em."

Wingate got up and thumped across the floor heavily.

"Peter, you can't afford this sort of thing. You can't blame people for talking either. The whole thing's damned unusual. You'll have to send her back where she came from."

At this moment there was a knock upon the door. At Peter's reply Josie Brant entered. She carried a large dish which announced itself by an appetizing odor.

"Mr. Randle, Martha thought you and this gentleman might be hungry. She asked me to bring you these cinnamon buns."

"Oh, thanks."

In the moment of introduction, Wingate's bright brown eyes appraised the woman shrewdly. She was below medium height, and comely, her face rather too wide at the cheek bones. Her eyes of gray were bold and set with a slight uptilt at the outer corners. Wingate somehow received the impression that there might be a motive behind the offering of cinnamon buns. He had been ready to be sorry for her but not so sorry as he might be for his idiotic young friend, who was placing himself so unreservedly in a false position.

"Won't you sit down?" Peter asked her.

"No, thanks," she said. Her glance flashed into Wingate's for the fraction of a second, but she went out quickly, closing the door. Wingate's gaze followed her

until she disappeared. Then he turned upon Peter frowning. Peter was already eating a cinnamon bun.

"Damn it all, Peter," he growled, "you don't mean to tell me that you're going to fall for this sort of thing—that you're going to assume responsibility for this woman. She's lying to you of course—"

Peter straightened, his nostrils dilating curiously. "You—you mustn't talk like that, Wingate," he sputtered excitedly. "She's a guest in my house. You don't know anything about her. I—I can't have you saying that she's lying to me. She isn't. It's not fair—not fair to her—or to me. She hasn't any place to go. I'm not going to ship her away. And I'd rather you wouldn't talk about her like that while she's in my house."

Wingate was a man of violent temper and such talk from any other man than Peter would have made him reach for his hat. As it was, he only grinned, reached for the bottle of Scotch, extended his long legs and drank.

"Oh, all right, Peter," he said, coolly. "Have it your own way. None of my business of course. But there must be some one—some friends or relations—"

"I tell you there aren't," said Peter eagerly. "She's told me so. No one except the Cathcart woman and she's gone. She has nowhere to go, Wingate. That's a fact. She lost her job in New York. That's why she came to Milestown, and she's been too sick to do anything. She'd have thrown herself in the canal if I hadn't come along."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Why no—not in so many words," said Peter thoughtfully after a moment, "but I got that idea. At any rate, here she is. I've got to stick to her, Wingate."

Wingate drank slowly, munching a bun, then at last rose and knocked out the ash of his pipe loudly against the fire-dog as though absolving himself of all participation in this decision. But he wore a smile when he offered Peter his hand. His young friend, he was sure, was uncorrupted by any kind of self-interest, or indeed by any uncertainties as to the outcome of the curious position he had taken.

"Well, Peter," he said heartily, "every man must be the judge of his own impulses. I'm too worldly for your code, but I can't say I'm not somewhat in sympathy with it. Women in distress aren't my line at all. You've taken on more of a job than *I* would want. But if I can help you in any way I'll do what I can any time. Good-by. I'll be going to New York about Wednesday. Let me know if you change your mind."

Peter walked silently with the painter to the muddy "flivver" and then turned slowly back to the house while Wingate, with a tremendous racket of a low gear, drove up the hill and over the canal to the main road.

Queer fish—Peter! But he had his point of view on life as definite as anything of Wingate's. He seemed to think, to live in terms of abstraction. He only half saw things or he saw them too thoroughly. In his art he only half saw the big thought behind the thing he was painting, but too thoroughly the details of it. In the case of this stray woman, Josie Brant, he only half saw the difficulties that might come of her, but he saw too thoroughly his obligation to the responsibility that Fortune had thrust in his way. And in either case what he saw most thoroughly was most convincing and most fallacious. But he had a will of his own and he went upon his way

as completely oblivious of other people's opinions or conventions as a dog upon his own private affair in an interesting drainpipe.

There was something admirable in the simplicity of his viewpoint and of his code. But it was a code belonging to another generation and was destined for rough usage in the age in which he lived. The case of Josie Brant needed the application of the principles of common sense of which Peter had nothing. It was quite clear that he was already dealing with it from the viewpoint of his lofty idealism—a wrong to be righted, a human creature to be saved. It seemed a pity that the woman couldn't have come to some one else—any one else but Peter Randle.

A few days later Peter Randle climbed the hill to Wingate's studio and told him that he had decided to go with him to New York. He made evasive replies to questions, but it was clear to Wingate that Peter had learned something more of the history of Josie Brant and that the visit to New York was to be more in her interest than in his own. Wingate made no comment. He had offered Peter his advice. If Peter did not choose to avail himself of it, Wingate was justified in washing his hands of the whole affair.

He did not intend that the misfortunes of Peter's visitor should cast any shadow upon his own visit to New York, which was to be given up, quite frankly, to the relaxations that he needed after five weeks of hard work out of doors in all weather. And if it was possible to manage it he intended that Peter should join in the festivities that he had planned. He was rather amused at the prospect of viewing the Arcadian simplicities of Peter Randle in a company such as he was likely to meet, for instance,

in the studio of Jimmy Blake, a roystering lot, addicted to nocturnal hours and the superficial pleasures that life affords to people who have plenty of money and a great deal of idle time.

Wingate was a widower with no responsibility in life but a grown daughter—and he picked his companions as he chose. He belonged to no cults and shunned the company of the socially elect and the “highbrows.” He was merely a master craftsman and he believed that if his mind grew old his work would grow old with it. And so when he had exhausted his ideas and his skill at Red Bridge he found that the people at Jimmy Blake’s studio in New York offered him rest, relaxation and the amusement that he needed. Their modernity and their youth renewed and invigorated him. He had no concern with their morals or their lack of them. He played his own game and his own philosophy of life had long been impervious to any lasting influence of his associations.

As to Peter Randle, he was sure the change of scene would do him good. No one could long be stodgy in a company that included Lola Oliver, Claire Morrison or “Tommy” Keith.

CHAPTER II

TOMMY AND HER CROWD

1

ALL New Yorkers come from elsewhere. This appears to be so true that if one had not met the indigenous New Yorker it would seem quite easy to believe that the early inhabitants and their descendants had all retired to parts unknown before the overwhelming invasion.

Maisie Keith, called "Tommy" by her familiars, was a New Yorker from Scranton, Pennsylvania, and lived at the Ritz. She had a suite of four rooms and a bath, occupied by herself, a French maid and two Pekingese pups. She called herself a bachelor girl, which was only another way of saying that she had cut loose from the few responsible relations left to her and gone her own way in spite of the devil and Aunt Sophy. Aunt Sophy Whitehead was her Victorian aunt who lived in an apartment on Riverside Drive. She was afraid of Tommy and had been so often shocked by the conduct of her gay niece that she dared to come to the Ritz only when business matters made her presence necessary; and only then in the company of her husband, Mr. Matthew Whitehead, who stood with a fatherly air, patting his stomach with affectionate fat hands, giving Tommy wise and stupid advice in which Aunt Sophy tremulously joined while Tommy smoked cigarette after cigarette and at last in utter boredom smiled them out.

Tommy was, of course, rich. She was also up to the

minute, and prided herself on enjoying the latest of everything, the newest perfumes, the newest attachments to her automobiles, the newest dishes, the newest cafés, the newest vices. . . .

But she wasn't altogether selfish. No girl could be called "Tommy" who hadn't her generous moments. She really amounted to something at the Ritz and had grown accustomed to estimate her own importance in the city itself by the amount of money that she spent. She was very pretty with pale yellow hair and dark brown eyes. Her nose was straight, slightly widened at the nostrils. Her lips were sulky, drawn decisively, but could wreath in sudden garish smiles. It was a beauty dependent upon its animation and in repose had the contours of one slightly overtrained.

As she stood at the mirror dressing for dinner at Irma Lockett's she found herself haggard, and plucked impatiently a gray hair that she discovered at her temple. She was twenty-six. Twenty-six! God! How the months rolled by! She looked her age—every year of it. Never until to-night had she felt herself willing to admit that life was defeating her—that in the pursuit of new expedients, pleasure was exhausting itself in the chase. More dangerous excitements now beckoned and from amongst them loomed the vision of John Salazar. She reached feverishly for lip stick and colored powder.

The dinner at Irma Lockett's was merely a prelude to the theater, a dance at the Maréchale followed by the usual riot at Jimmy Blake's. Irma, not yet twenty-three, was already arranging a divorce from her second husband so that she might marry Victor Adriance, the composer. The dinner was a sort of love feast in celebration

of the certainty that Irma was off with the old husband before being on with the new.

In the middle of the dinner Bob Lockett glanced at his wrist watch and got up.

"Well, good-by all. I guess I'm through. Exit Exhibit B. I'm off. Got a date with the Empress of Jugoslavia." He stopped at Irma's chair. "Give us a kiss, old girl. And ring me up if anything goes wrong. So long, Victor."

And he went, accepting his dismissal with an air of bright sadness, torn between the appeal of definite liberty and the regret for the millions that he was leaving behind.

Tommy smiled as they all rose and went for their wraps. She was quite indifferent to the moral aspects of this sort of degeneracy. She had already served too long before the altars of false gods. What difference did it make? What difference did anything make so long as you could forget it. She smiled at John Salazar as he handed her into her wraps, aware of his wine-colored eyes and his warm complexion. There was a Spanish strain in his blood—something Hebraic, too, to be noted at the eyes and lips. But she thought him a beautiful creature, from his sleek black hair to the toes of his dancing shoes and carefully finished in every respect. A gleam of white revealed another perfection when he smiled.

She liked his air of the conqueror. She liked the thought that she could never rebuff or intimidate him. She liked his menace.

They dropped Georgia Wellington at the stage door of a theater somewhere in the roaring Forties—where she had a part in a successful play—and went on to their

destination, reduced to four. Tommy always enjoyed the stir of her entrance at the theater, aware of the expensiveness and the daring of her costumes, feeling rather than hearing the encomiums of women near by upon her companion. They were indeed a handsome couple, expressing, not without a suggestion of vulgarity, all that was recent and worldly. Victor Adriance, too, added something to their prestige with his fluffy tea-colored hair, for he had written two successful operettas and received from the leader of the orchestra a nod and a differential smile. Tommy liked these tokens of importance. It pleased her to have a touch upon the vital activities in the night life of the city. She courted the deference of major domos and head waiters and called them by their first names. At the Maréchale silken ropes were lowered to admit her party past the waiting crowd of lesser mortals who saw it conducted to a reserved table where an efficient waiter bobbed attendance. All the people that she knew did these things if they could afford them. It seemed a point of honor with her crowd to have public preferences shown them by these highly paid, grimacing servants who enjoyed their brief night rule and reaped the harvest that people like Tommy Keith sowed. It never entered Tommy's head that she was vulgar. She had lived so long in this highly superficial atmosphere that she was unfamiliar with any other life with which to compare it. Where everybody was vulgar nobody was.

She glanced across the table at John Salazar. Their glances met and held each other. Love? She did not know. To all appearance he was a part of the perfection of all the things that Fortune had showered upon her.

The music began again. He rose and swayed toward her.

2

Jimmy Blake's studio was at the top of a business building in a cross-town street. It was almost too wonderful a studio for a person who really knew how to paint. Jimmy was aware that the studios of the men who were really accomplishing things were mere work-shops, littered with old canvases, dusty porcelains and tarnished brasses, with a collection of draperies for backgrounds or for the spots of color so dear to the eye. Jimmy's was not this sort of a studio. Its hardwood floors were marked not by the stains of paint flung about in the ecstasy of creation, but by the scrapes of the dancing feet of his night visitors. There was an easel (in a dark corner), a grand piano, a saxophone, a 'cello—all vehicles of Jimmy's virtuosity; a *prie-dieu* (why, God knows) and a great gold chair on an elevated platform; two or three divans piled with gay cushions; some good ship models and Chinese lanterns. Upon the walls, between the draperies, were drawings in chalk and paintings in oil, violently modern—distorted nudes, twisted “still lifes” and others strangely streaked with orange, cobalt and vermillion which defied the comprehension or analysis of any except those who had created them.

Jimmy, who had begun life doing water colors in the English fashion quite prettily, was now a modern because one didn't have to work very hard to master the simple violences of its technique; and when he condescended to paint at all he was more outrageous in his color patterns than the most advanced of the theorists whose methods

he followed. But fortunately for the world, and perhaps for Jimmy Blake, he found little time for painting. He had inherited, of course, a great deal more money than was good for him and the parties that took place in his studio were famous among those who were supposed to know what was what in the city after dark.

Miss Keith's group disgorged from the elevator, was greeted by sounds, like many persons practicing vociferously many tunes on various instruments at once. It was, as they discovered, Jimmy, doing his bit on the saxophone with Claire Morrison trying to "jazz" an accompaniment. Frederick Wingate, the painter, was scraping on a 'cello *ad lib.*, while beside him Meyer Cohen was solemnly beating with his fist upon a brass salver. Terry Lawless, the clown of the party, was shrieking into a comb wrapped in tissue paper. There was a table covered with bottles and Jimmy's man, Wiggins, was shaking cocktails. A pause in the commotion to permit of cheers while Jimmy's saxophone laughed a greeting.

Tommy Keith, tossing her wraps aside, slid out upon the floor, her feet twinkling to the syncopation, where she was immediately seized by some one who sprang to life from a corner and whirled furiously around the room. After that when she would have fallen exhausted upon a divan Jimmy Blake caught her and hauled her up to the gold chair on the model stand where they all drank to her and proclaimed her Lady of Misrule.

It seemed scarcely possible that a party begun at such a tempo could long endure the strain upon nerve and sinew, but they had all come with a definite intention of being amused in spite of themselves, a desperate business indeed for persons jaded with pleasure, and each of them

bent to it determinedly. Ice tinkled in tall glasses and it was not the fault of Wiggins if any suffered emptiness through his inadvertence.

Terry Lawless crowned Tommy with a wreath of artificial cherry blossoms. Then put on Jimmy's cap of the Naval Reserve and with Tommy's collaboration imitated a famous tenor whom he knew, singing the love scene at the end of the first act of "Madame Butterfly," so that Victor Adriance, catching the spirit of the thing at the piano, brought the burlesque to a harmonious and altogether satisfactory conclusion.

When Lola Oliver came in, they made her wrap herself in a piece of spangled drapery snatched from a near-by screen and do her famous dances, suggesting new moods and motives—fear, jealousy, passion, rage, which she interpreted with a freedom and fury that put her professional evening performance into the shade.

Then came Jack and Claire in a *Dance Apache* followed by a riot of jazz which ended in the collapse of Terry Lawless. Terry sank by mistake into a deep brass jardinière which just fitted his generous curves and was only extracted with difficulty.

In a moment of exhaustion between spells of laughter and dancing, Tommy sought a dark corner to recuperate her energies. A lull for the moment had fallen, a recession of the tide of madness that had possessed them all. The party had divided into groups, as befitted their moods, some sentimental, some sprightly, some maudlin. Claire Morrison was telling Frederick Wingate why his last picture was a failure; Lola Oliver was talking business with Meyer Cohen, the theatrical producer; Irma Lockett leaned over the piano looking unutterable things at Victor

Adriance, who was playing softly a lyric from his new operetta. Tommy sighed, taking refuge in the immunity of the moment and flung herself back on the divan. Under her something wriggled. It was the arm of a man. She glanced at him—a tall fellow who had been aimlessly hovering around the walls the whole evening. She straightened and turned. His quizzical eyes seemed bright blue in the deep tan of his face and when he smiled his nose wrinkled pleasantly.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he said.

“Don’t mention it. You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But they let me in.”

She examined his face again. What impressed her most when he spoke was its mild inquiring beneficence.

And then abruptly for no apparent reason in the world, “Do you know John Salazar?” he asked.

She turned on him quickly seeking an ulterior motive. He had none, she was sure, nor any idea of her close relationship with the man he mentioned.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Er—I’d heard of him—from Wingate.”

“Oh. That’s Mr. Salazar—over there.”

Peter followed her gaze, his own remaining absently fixed for a moment. And then he muttered another curious remark:

“Something ought to mourn when something dies.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Tommy, querulously.

Her companion started, stared at her and then laughed awkwardly. “I must have been thinking aloud,” he said.

“What were you talking about?”

“Nothing—nothing at all.”

She looked at him impatiently and then shrugged. A nut! She was not sure whether to be bored or amused.

"You don't seem to belong with this crowd," she said.

"Don't I? I was hoping I might," he said quietly. "We all grow up too fast. It's nice to see people happy—like children playing."

She knew nothing of this man except that he was not her sort. He had been wandering about so aimlessly that he seemed like a fish out of water. But his mild blue eyes were now really sparkling with approval.

"Children!" she gasped, as his glance sought the shadow behind a teak-wood screen where Jean De Motte and Larry Trimble sat very close together.

She turned toward her companion, who was still smiling toward the darkness.

"Yes, children," he muttered, absently. "I like children's parties. Love is meant to be childlike."

"Love!" she said with a shrug. Then laughed at him rudely, but he only smiled.

"I've found that there's almost always an excuse for everybody," he said cheerfully.

"Most people need all the excuses anybody can make for them."

"I don't know anything about peoples' temptations," he replied, quietly, "I never have any myself."

"Never have any temptations! Oh, say, you're a scream!"

He grinned. "Am I? A scream? Yes, I am, rather."

"You don't care for women, do you?" she asked, really amused.

"No. Not much. They fuss about in people's way such

a lot. I live on an island—that's why I never have any temptations."

"On an island!" she exclaimed. "Oh, you're Fred Wingate's friend. I've heard of you, the artist. Mr.—er—"

"Randle—Peter Randle. Yes, I paint—landscapes and river things."

"I remember. You just come out of your hole once a year to look at your shadow and then go back again."

He stared at her soberly. Then grinned.

"That's it. A ground hog. But Wingate said I needed 'jazzing up' a bit and so he brought me here."

"I see. And do you think you've been 'jazzed up' any?" she asked, amusedly.

"Oh, yes. I'm having a fine time. I've been watching you dance. You're very graceful."

Her lip curled in contempt at the awkwardness of his compliment. He was just a joke, but for some reason she did not feel like hurting him. He seemed so vulnerable. Somehow it would have been like kicking a dog that wagged its tail.

"You think everything's lovely, don't you," she said, ironically. "But it's not New Yorky to do that. In New York we assume everybody's rotten so as to be sure to be on the safe side."

"Oh! I can't believe you mean that."

"I do. You're apt to make a lot of mistakes if you go sprinkling attar of roses into your opinions about people in this town."

Cautiously he examined the shadows behind the screen.

"You're trying pretty hard to be pleasant Mr.—er—Randle," she announced, keenly. "But you can't put it over. You don't like this sort of thing."

"Oh—I— Why, yes, I do."

She shook her head. "You're trying too hard. You're entirely too damned polite to be sincere."

He stared at her mildly.

"Why, I—I didn't intend to be so—so damned polite if you're not used to it."

There was real delight in her laugh.

"You don't approve of the modern woman," she asserted.

"Don't I? How do you know?" He searched about in his mind for a thought—it seemed, as though among cobwebs. "Why, I've been—er—to much worse parties than this."

She laughed again.

"But they were not respectable. Now were they? I'd really like to know what you think of us—women, I mean."

He was now staring at the paintings on the walls.

"Daubs," he said with apparent irrelevance but great enthusiasm.

"Answer me," she said, imperiously.

"H—m," he muttered, still staring.

"I ask you a civil question and you talk of something else."

"No—not of something else. I was just thinking—"

"What—?"

"About these thingummy-bobs on the walls here—red, yellow and green streaks—they're modern."

"Is that the answer?"

"Yes. Daubs. Fake individualism. Self-expression. Rubbish! Good Lord!"

She glanced at the canvas above them.

"I believe people ought to express themselves—"

"Even to making—er—daubs of their lives—"

"Oh! Now I understand you. But Jimmy Blake wouldn't agree."

"Oh, yes, he would, if he were honest."

"He thinks he is. Nobody's modern if he isn't honest with himself."

He glanced at her face. It was a pretty enough face. Pretty enough to lie to. Instead of lying he said what he wanted to say.

"Everything that I believe in teaches me that—er—this sort of thing—" and he glanced at the streaky canvases—"is a pose and rather a filthy one."

"Filthy!"

"You want me to speak the truth," he said. "Poses annoy me. Any kind of poses."

His voice was deep, its tones sharp. His tail no longer wagged. He seemed on the point of biting her. He was most amusing. She prodded him again.

"You haven't any monopoly of honesty, have you?"

He didn't seem to hear her or even to be aware of her. He was addressing apparently, the smoky atmosphere of the room.

"Modernism!" he muttered again. "Rubbish!"

He was rather insulting than otherwise.

"You're speaking of me, I believe," she said, coolly.

"You!" He turned toward her in astonishment. "You! Good God, no!"

"But I'm modern. I've said so."

"Did you? Well— Oh, what's the use—" He broke off and stared at the ceiling again.

"Go on," she insisted.

"H—m. You won't like it."

"What does that matter?"

"Women all want to be told pleasant things."

"The fussy kind. I'm not fussy."

"Oh, I see." He moved his large hands awkwardly up and down as though trying by this means to become articulate. Then he burst forth with sudden violence.

"Well, you—you think you're honest because you follow your instincts and obey 'em. Is that honesty? Aren't you something more than an instinct? Isn't there something else more worth being honest with than a mere instinct?"

"You mean that you don't think my instincts are reliable?"

"No. I'm just wondering whether they're *your* instincts or not. Or just a reflection of your crowd here—a sort of mass hysteria that drives you in spite of yourself."

She frowned and looked away.

"I'm not hysterical."

"You move in a hysterical set. New York is seething with them. Perhaps I notice it more coming from the quiet."

He reflected this quiet in his eyes which were like fixed points amid commotion.

"One only lives once," she said with a shrug.

There was a silence. His voice fell a note. He gazed past her.

"Isn't it a confession of failure to want to live so beautiful a thing as life too rapidly?"

An idealist. She wanted to laugh again but did not. She effaced her smile and spoke with mock seriousness.

"You think we go too fast—"

"As though you were driven," he broke in quickly, "by a legion of devils poking at you with pitchforks."

"Devils?" she asked. "Do you think I'm as bad as that?"

"No," he replied with great solemnity. "I don't think you're bad at all."

"No worse, at least," she said with an ironical glance at him, "than those happy creatures behind the teak-wood screen."

He turned slowly staring at her, his blue eyes round with chagrin. All at once, it seemed the enormity of his honesty had come upon him. "Oh!" he gasped, blinking at her. "Don't say that. I haven't thought—I—I couldn't think of you in that way."

"Oh, can't you," she said with a grin. "Then how else did you think of me?"

"Not like that. I didn't mean you— No," he went on hurriedly, "I don't know you. I don't know anything about women. But I've been watching you. I seem quite certain that you weren't meant for *that* sort of thing. I don't think you'd ever stoop to cheap vices. If you sinned you'd sin splendidly. . . ."

Extraordinary. She stared at him. Then looked across to where Jack Salazar stood poised like a faun above Claire Morrison's chair. Tommy was startled. It was almost as though this creature had read her thoughts. She turned away nervously.

"After all, you know very little about me," she said, dryly. "Since we've just met—or rather never met at all."

He bent his head.

"You think I'm impertinent. . . ."

She gave a shrug. "What difference does it make? The opinion of a ground hog upon the weather may be valuable, but—" And she shrugged again.

He bent over his clasped hands muttering.

"I guess it's a case of the ground hog coming out of his hole and seeing his own shadow once too often. It's about time he went back in again."

Something in his attitude and in his tone compelled her. Contrition—that was it. The men of her set were never that. Defiant, satirical, surly—but never remorseful. He was such a great creature to show such humility—like a Saint Bernard dog, with its tail between its legs.

She softened suddenly—unaccountably, and laid her fingers impulsively upon his arm.

"I've hurt you. I'm sorry," she said, gently. "But you said something that startled me. I've been rude to you. Forgive me."

He turned his fingers up to grasp hers and grinned—the Saint Bernard now wagging its tail in grateful appreciation of a kindness.

The last surge of gayety had broken aimlessly and spent its course. Lola Oliver crossed the room, Frederick Wingate lumbering after her. She seemed the only one in the room with sense enough to want to go home. But following her example people rose and hunted for their wraps.

"Peter, my boy," roared Wingate, "you're a success. Anybody who can make Tommy Keith forget that it's three o'clock in the morning—"

"I sat on him by mistake," said Tommy with a laugh. "And he returned the compliment by sitting on *me*! Good

night, Mr. Peter Randle," she said, ignoring his protest. "Come and see me some time."

Randle bowed awkwardly as she turned and raised her arms for the shimmering wrap that her escort was holding for her. He was a very handsome fellow, even at close range, Randle noted, tall, dark and well formed and Miss Keith accepted his air of proprietorship as a matter of course. Randle blinked after them with his beneficent blue gaze.

"That's John Salazar," he said to Wingate.

"John Salazar, yes. Tommy Keith's own particular special."

Randle frowned.

They bade good night to their host, found their coats and went down in the elevator to the street. Wingate glanced at his companion curiously. His head was bent and he was still frowning.

"What's your interest in Salazar?" Wingate asked as he paused on the step to light a cigarette.

Peter did not reply for a moment and then— "He's the man I came to New York to find," he said, quietly.

"Salazar! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to be sure he was the man. There's no doubt of it. Good looking devil. Slick though—oily. Just the sort to get the best of Josie Brant or any woman."

"Is she worth helping?" asked Wingate, skeptically.

"Yes—yes, she is," said Peter, excitedly. "I've heard her story. I believe in her. He's got to pay."

"H—m. You've got a job on your hands."

"No. He's got to do the right thing."

"And if he won't—"

The darkness hid the expression of Peter's face from his companion, but his voice was very quiet. "I'll have to see about that," he said.

They had reached their hotel. Wingate yawned heavily but Peter said nothing more.

CHAPTER III

PETER VISITS THE RITZ

1

WINGATE had met Lola Oliver in Paris while the dancer was learning her art at a famous school. That was ten years ago when she was a mere child. Wingate had not been so famous then, though a year later the Luxemburg had bought one of his paintings for its collection, thus giving an impetus to the snowball of his success. They had met again in New York where he had seen her dance and sent in his card to her dressing room after the performance. Wingate was a hard-bitten man of the world, old enough to be Lola's father, not beyond the age of sentiment but content with the rewards that he was now reaping from a life of early struggles in which his wife had shared.

He liked Lola because she helped to supply in New York the ingredients lacking in his life at Red Bridge—gayety, charm and good-fellowship. For in her private life there was no nonsense about Lola. Her arts of seduction were purely professional. She had married once unsuccessfully and thus became inoculated against recurrence. She was a good business woman and had made enough money to live in comparative comfort for the rest of her days. She averred that she had domestic tastes and was waiting for the arrival of an aged billionaire with one lung and an affectionate disposition. She played around with

Tommy's crowd because theirs was the best imitation of joy that she had been able to find in New York, or out of it, and because from an imitation of joy the artist in her was able to assimilate some of the qualities of joy itself. She was fond of Tommy Keith and believed her to be the victim rather than the favorite of Fortune.

Lola did not dislike Salazar. Few women did. She found him charming in spite of the fact that he had some of the general qualities of the professional male beauty; also in spite of the fact that her own unfortunate experience had warned her to be wary of sleek, dark young men who were more familiar with tea rooms and dancing floors than business offices. He satisfied her artistic sense. But she knew that he was not the sort of man to control the destinies of Tommy Keith, who needed a stronger hand than his to bring her a sense of responsibility to herself and to society. Such a marriage as this would end as her own had so quickly done—upon the rocks.

"You know, Fred," she said to Wingate as she gave him tea in her apartment, "Tommy Keith is giving Jack Salazar an awful rush—five or six months now. He's got a pretty bad name, even for Broadway. But you can't talk to her. She's got so much money that she thinks she can do anything. But this burg will let people do what they want until it gets sore because they want what isn't required. Then, they might as well move out, even of the Ritz."

She took up a cigarette and lighted it carefully. "God knows I'm broad-minded enough to burst even with a headache band, but I'm willing to say right here that unless Tommy is going to marry Jack Salazar she'd better be

keeping him off the premises—especially after two A.M. It's not respectable in a blonde spinster of twenty-six even if she pays her hotel bills promptly and tips every living soul from the buttony boy at the elevator to the hotel manager. She thinks that squares her conscience account, but it doesn't. Because there's Jack. He may look like the Duke of Braganza. But there's a difference. Jack just misses being a parlor lizard by the bat of one eyelash. The only thing that saves him is that commission broker's office where he goes to work from two to three some Thursdays. Mind you, I don't say it's not natural for him to be crazy about Tommy with all her money and the fuss she makes over him—and all. I rather like him. He's a peach to look at. He's a nice boy. But that's not enough. I married a 'nice boy.' They don't wear. I paid Dick Gilson's bills for two years just kicking my feet but I couldn't stand it when the other woman came along and then I gave him the *savate*. Those nice dark boys all ought to be put in cages for exhibition purposes. They're too beautiful to be exposed too long to the white lights and the night air."

Wingate smiled lazily through his cigar smoke. It was Lola's way to treat her tragedies with the light comedy touch. She had loved Dick Gilson. Her opinions upon Jack Salazar were valuable.

"Oh, Jack wants to marry Tommy all right. Why wouldn't he? A hundred and twenty thousand a year isn't such a bad meal ticket for a lad whose only capital is a pair of claret-colored eyes, a straight nose and a set of teeth out of an advertisement of painless dentistry. But Tommy doesn't want to marry Jack. She doesn't want to marry anybody. She's told me so. The idea bores her

stiff. But it might come to that. I don't know. She's going it too fast, that's sure. She's soaked with pleasure like a sponge. There's an end to that kind of thing. I know all about it. I was that way once—when I first came to New York. I married in desperation."

"But you were just a kid. Surely Tommy is old enough."

"No woman ever gets old enough to forget that she's young enough to make a fool of herself. It's all right enough when she yields because she hasn't the strength to resist. That's sheer nobility. It's not noble when she yields just for the sake of yielding."

"Fine distinctions," said Wingate, ironically.

"But real ones to a woman—who knows. Oh, Tommy's talked to me. I don't know why, except that she guessed I'd be honest with her. She's a hard-fisted little devil in some ways. Gets that from her father. He owned a bunch of coal mines. But there's a lot of her mother in her too. She ran away with another man when Tommy was twelve. Another fool woman. Oh, hell! I've no patience with them."

Lola got up and wandered around the room poking her fingers into the flowers. Wingate watched her for a moment, smoking in silence. This wasn't his life, not his real life, even in this pleasant apartment with his good friend Lola who could swear when she was excited. It was all too complicated for him. In spite of his culture he never got very far from the soil, in which he was deep-rooted. From it, he drew his philosophy, like the sap which ran in his friends the trees and gave them the life that made the world beautiful. Men of Salazar's type were to Wingate a constant source of amazement, en-

crustations on the social body, like the fungi that grew upon the boles of the trees—colorful, beautiful in their intricate patterns, yet subsisting on the main trunk, distorting it, stunting its growth and at last bringing it to decay. To Wingate, John Salazar was just a parasite, a growth nurtured in the soil of a too intensive cultivation. In Red Bridge he would have been a superfluity. In New York Wingate treated men of his sort with good-natured indifference. They helped pass the time but gave him an unpleasant sense of futility that grated harshly along his nerves. And what he already knew of Salazar did not lend to the gentleness of his judgment.

"The trouble with you women," he growled, "is that your minds are blinded by your vision. If it wasn't for women like you and Tommy Keith these pretty boys would have to quit fooling and go to work. You've got every sympathy for Tommy because she's preyed on by her emotions the way you were. But she ought to have sense enough by this time to see things for herself. What's the use mincing matters? This boy Salazar is no good. If Tommy marries him she'll get just what she deserves."

At the decisive accent in Wingate's voice Lola turned.

"You know something about him?"

Wingate was silent for a moment. Men of his type are clannish in concealing the sins of their fellows.

"Surely, Lola," he said slowly, "there must be some things—even in this generation, that a woman can't forgive."

"Murder—possibly," said Lola. She lowered her cigarette and examined her companion. "Why—have you heard something more than usually rotten about Jack?"

Wingate scowled. "Yes," he said at last, decisively,

and told her briefly the story of Josie Brant—not through Peter's eyes but through his own. "I'm not taking any brief for Peter's idealism. If she'd come to me I'd probably have sent her off to the Red Lion Hotel without even listening to her story. Peter didn't. He listened. He'd believe Jonah or Baron Munchausen. But I know her type. Josie must have laid it on pretty thick in her quiet way. She was a ticket seller at a movie theater on Broadway. She's got a head for money and accounts she told Peter. She's not the fluffy sort. Smallish, dark hair, knew her way about in the world, I'd say. Well, Jack Salazar promised to marry her. Then he quit the game. That's her story. Peter believes it. I don't fancy her particularly but I guess there's truth in it. Though how the devil in these days . . ."

"That's one kind of woman's way of getting a man," said Lola.

"Well, she didn't get him. Imagine Jack Salazar falling for that with Tommy Keith's millions dangling almost in reach!"

"When did all this happen?"

"Recently, this winter."

"I see." Lola smeared her cigarette into the ash tray. "A girl like Tommy . . . I don't know. . . . She doesn't care what happens with a man before she gets hold of him—"

"But this—"

"It's pretty rotten. But how much of it is true? You say you didn't like this woman."

Wingate frowned. "I don't like a lot of people. But that doesn't say they're wrong. Maybe she was just a little too quietly assertive to be in that atmosphere, all

gray and smoky and abstracted like Peter. She had a narrow eye. Something of an appeal in it though. Damn the woman! Why did she have to come to Peter? He's a stubborn brute when he gets an idea stuck in his head."

"Do you mean that Peter Randle is setting himself up to be her champion?"

Wingate nodded, but frowned when Lola smiled.

"Lovely comedy situation, you'll admit."

"It's no laughing matter," Wingate growled. "He's got his dignity. I don't want to see him made a fool of. He's in dead earnest about it. Says Jack Salazar will have to marry her. That's why he came to New York. They met last night. He didn't want to make a rumpus at Jimmy Blake's of course. But he went rushing from the hotel this morning as soon as he had his breakfast—almost run over by a 'bus—bound for Salazar's office. That was safe enough. He didn't find him though he waited two hours. I've sent him up to the Metropolitan Gallery this afternoon with the promise that I'd help him to-morrow. It's up to me. I've got to help him out or do my best to steer him clear of the whole business."

"But where does your obligation come in?"

"It doesn't come in. I like him, that's all. The heart of a child in the body of a man—a kind child that takes up the fight with the school bully. A little bewildered by the job—but determined. You can't tell what a fellow like that will do. You can't judge him by the ordinary standards. There's apt to be a scrap. I don't want to see Peter get the worst of it."

Lola lay back on the divan, thoughtful.

"I'd like to help you," she said at last. "I was wondering—"

As she paused, he looked up hopefully. It was always time to be hopeful, he had found, when Lola cerebrated. She had talked to Peter at Jimmy Blake's studio for a few moments, but her reaction had been negative. Lola's extreme sophistication had been proof against his simplicity. She thought he acted like an absent-minded professor just out of a hop joint. But he had nice eyes. If it hadn't been for Fred Wingate she would rather have liked the idea of "sicking" him on to Jack Salazar just to hear the glass crash. That not being Fred's idea of a proper culmination for Peter's pilgrimage, something would have to be thought of that would serve the ends of justice and be at the same time merciful to Wingate's foolish friend.

"What were you wondering?" Wingate asked.

"Well, you know, I've got to take your word about this Peter Randle. I thought he was just about as joyful a companion for a gay evening as a hired pallbearer. I told him that I was a friend of yours, that I'd heard all about his island and his flock of dogs. He wrinkled his nose at me and asked me 'if I liked cinnamon buns?' Cinnamon buns! Do I *look* as though I liked cinnamon buns? Do I dance like a lady accustomed to dining at a dairy lunch?"

Wingate laughed. "They're good—those cinnamon buns of Peter's. He was paying you a compliment. The greatest compliment Peter can pay is to ask people to his island to eat cinnamon buns. He was thinking of you on his island. That's the way his mind works."

"Well, it's not the way mine works," she said with a laugh. "And you'll have to furnish me with a few sides of script when you want me to understand. I guess he's

all right but you've got to admit that as a parlor entertainer, he's just Mr. John K. Frost."

"He and Tommy seemed to be hitting it off all right," said Wingate.

"Yes, they did, and that's just what I was thinking about. Tommy must have been awfully out of conceit with herself to waste her time with Peter Randle. But she did ask him to come to see her. And that gave me an idea. Why not let him go? And just to give a little point to his visit you might tell him that Tommy is thinking of marrying Jack Salazar. Get the idea? If he wants to pull any of his Good Samaritan stuff he's got a chance that will beat the Red Cross a *mile*. Make him tell her the sad story of Josie Brant and then wait to see what happens."

"What *will* happen?" asked Wingate, seriously.

"I don't know. She may throw herself weeping on his bosom. She may throw herself weeping on Jack's. But we'll succeed in getting over the main plot of the act and that's the best that we can do. At the best Tommy might think the story worth listening to. At the worst—" She broke off with a laugh and took a fresh cigarette—"At the worst she might only throw Peter Randle down the elevator shaft."

Wingate put down his extinguished cigar and stretched his legs toward the window. "But it doesn't bring Jack Salazar to Red Bridge to marry Josie."

"That, of course, is foolishness," said Lola, dryly. "And you know it."

"Yes," he admitted with his slow smile. "But Peter doesn't."

"Well, it's a fact just the same. The sooner you get

him out of New York the better for him. If Jack doesn't injure him somebody will. There's a thousand taxi drivers just waiting for Peter Randle to come out into the middle of the traffic and be entered in the death column."

Wingate frowned. Lola must have her joke. But it wasn't on Peter—not yet.

"Oh, I don't care what you do," he said, "only don't get me in it."

"All right. All I want you to do is to send your friend around here when he comes back from the Metropolitan Museum."

Wingate looked at her dubiously but agreed.

After he had gone Lola bent her head thoughtfully and then with a practical air, picked up the telephone instrument and got Tommy's hotel.

"Is this the Ritz? Miss Keith's apartment, please. . . . Hello! Is that you, Tommy? This is Lola. . . . Fine. . . . How are you? Well, Tommy, you've made another conquest. . . . Who? . . . Wouldn't you like to know! A real one this time—regular knock-down-and-drag-him-out. Fred Wingate's friend, Peter Randle. What did you do to him, Tommy? Tell him you were going to buy some of his pictures? He wants to come to see you. . . . You'd be *what*? Oh! delighted! Well, there's no accounting for tastes. But he *is* nice, Tommy, really. I mean it. Little brother to the bow-wows and all that sort of thing. He's done nothing but talk about you. Thinks you're beautiful . . . yep. . . . Sure he did—beautiful. And he's an artist, too. Wants to paint you, I guess. . . . Do you mean it? . . . When can he come? To-night, just after dinner. All right, I'll tell him. . . . G'by."

She put the transmitter down, fell back on the divan and laughed. Tommy Keith and Peter Randle. Fine third act stuff. A tear for every laugh. A laugh for every tear.

"I'd give a billion marks to listen behind a curtain," she said.

2

Tommy's acquiescence in Lola's proposal had been a surprise even to herself, for she wasn't given, as a rule, to wasting her valuable time upon unimportant matters. But it just happened that her plans for the afternoon and early evening had failed and unless somebody came in (Jack Salazar had gone out of town for the day) she would have been obliged to read a stupid book or (worse yet) be driven back upon her own thoughts, an occupation at the moment very uncongenial. If Jack had been coming to dinner the visit would have been impossible, but she remembered that the attitude of Peter Randle toward the questions that they had discussed had given her a great deal of amusement. And he presented an attraction that was different from that of any of the men that she knew. Barring a slight deference and awkwardness, he had not for one moment disclosed the slightest evidence that he was aware of the facts that Tommy was pretty and a woman. The one or two pleasant things that he had said were less compliments than awkward statements of what seemed to him rather obvious facts—about her dancing—and that queer judgment that she would "sin splendidly." How should such a strange creature know how she would sin? He had arrested her attention—startled her even with this clairvoyance. And

yet there was something very likable about him. It was actually an original experience to talk with a man not actuated by self-interest, a man as completely oblivious of sex or sentiment as an ocean wave. It was because of this estimate of his character that Lola's telephone message had so surprised her for she had been as little aware of having made an impression on Peter Randle as though she had not met him.

But no matter how or where her affections are engaged, no woman is averse to a new conquest. No lady of the limousine, happy in her own sentimental affairs, is unaware of the slightest glance of approval from the sidewalk. Therefore Tommy, though with a slight sense of amusement, dressed as carefully for the visit of Peter Randle as though she had expected to be going into the most formidable and interesting of company—her new orchid silk with silver lace that she had actually been saving for a more important occasion. She had some pride in convincing the visitor that she was both a woman and pretty.

Peter entered the darkened drawing room—for Tommy had a fine sense of the value of dim lighting—wearing a more than usually sober air. The room was close and smelt abominably of some obscure and insidious perfume. He was very uncomfortable, depressed as though at the funeral of a spinster aunt. Tommy rose, a violet and blue wraith, discarding the evening papers in which she had been reading the delightful account of a harrowing murder. Peter had, he supposed, expected for some reason to see her in the yellow dress that she had worn the previous evening and she seemed like a person that he had never met before. This somehow made his diffi-

culties greater. He was very sorry for her, because she seemed a nice sort of a creature, entirely too nice for the fellow Salazar, with whom she was so much in love.

Lola had done her part very thoroughly. She had, with great care and at some length, impressed upon Peter his duty to tell Tommy Keith all that he knew of Josie Brant and John Salazar. Peter had demurred at first, contending that his first mission was with Salazar himself. But Lola had been rather insistent upon Tommy's claims on the information, pointing out the danger of delay and reinforcing her argument by the statement that he would add strength to his mission by Tommy's repudiation of her lover—that she would be a possible help in insisting that Salazar do his duty by the unfortunate girl. And Peter had at last agreed to the unpleasant visit, very sorry indeed for Tommy, who was soon to be so greatly disillusioned. But he was now primed with purpose, intensely in earnest with the legitimacy of his errand.

A Pekingese pup sniffed suspiciously at his trouser leg while another, less venturesome, yapped at him from a distance. Peter blinked at Tommy's dress, then sat beside her on the couch, where she offered him a cigarette, took one and disposed herself among the pillows. His embarrassment was manifest and he seized upon the pretext of the suddenly friendly Pekingese which was pawing at his knee. Tommy examined his profile, comparing this man with the perfections of Salazar. Surely not a picturesque creature but bronzed and strong. Eyes deeply set under shaggy brows, good nose, strong chin. Why was it that he was not good looking? Because he sat with toes turned in? Or because one of the studs of his dress shirt had pulled out? But there was the same gentleness

about him that she had observed the night before and a little greater awkwardness. His bony hands took up the Pekingese pup and slowly rubbed its ears.

"I suppose you're wondering—er—why I've come to see you so soon?" he began.

Tommy met his gaze curiously and then smiled.

"I was hoping that it was because you wanted to see me soon," she said, lightly.

"Oh—er—of course. Of course I wanted to see you soon. Or—er—I wouldn't have been here," he said, brightly. "But you—you *did* ask me to come. Now didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. You know, I like dogs. So do you. Perhaps that's what made me forgive you for calling me names."

"Oh, say—you don't mean that!" he said, awkwardly. "You're a fine girl. I wouldn't say anything to hurt you if I could help it for the world."

She tried to keep from laughing and failed. He stared at her wide-eyed. Why was she laughing? He hadn't said anything funny. He was still trying to find the answer to this riddle when she spoke.

"I'm very sensitive," she said, demurely. "You seemed so wise that I knew everything you said must be true."

He frowned. "I'm not wise—not about women. They always annoy me. I never know what to say to them. I never know what they mean or what they're going to do next."

"Not even when they tell you pretty things as I'm doing?" she asked, quizzically.

"Well, it's nice of you, of course. But it's no use,"

he said. "You don't mean anything you say. And I know you don't mean it. It just complicates matters."

This was brief enough—uncompromising in its baldness. He had a sure sense that as an ambassador he was already a failure. But time seemed precious. He wanted to be sure that he would deliver his message and chose bluntness to put his timidity to flight. He was blinking at the opposite wall. What he saw there seemed to be beyond, away from her in some world of his own. The seductions that she usually employed in this dimly lighted corner passed him by like smoke blown down the winds. She had used them to-night more than half bored with the effort but in the hope of amusement. And instead of amusement or even conquest, she already found herself the victim of what appeared to be a sort of joke. She was annoyed—but less annoyed by his indifference than the casual impertinence of his language. She felt very much like getting up and showing him to the door. But she found herself still slightly curious as to his last words.

"You can't blame me for trying to make conversation," she said, coolly. "What do you mean by 'complicating matters'?"

He turned quickly toward her, his blue eyes emitting little sparks of eagerness.

"Well, you see, I came here with the express purpose of seeing you about something. I've got a lot to say and it's not easy to begin. In fact, I don't know how to begin at all because what I've got to say is very unpleasant."

She was aware of a growing interest, straightening slowly.

"Surely no more unpleasant than what you've already said," she replied, caustically.

He stared at her as though he hadn't understood her meaning and went on rapidly.

"Yes—more unpleasant than that. I've got to say what I came here for whether I want to or not. It's hard to say it because it's no fun making people unhappy—especially if you like them. I only met you last night but you gave me an impression of being too fine a sort not to have a word of warning when I can give it."

Great blundering idiot! What on earth was he driving at? But there was no doubting his sincerity. Whatever he had to say was born of a conviction that he was within his rights in speaking.

"It's you who are complicating matters now," she said, dryly. "What do you want to tell me? Go ahead, I guess I can stand it."

"I—I don't *want* to tell you anything," he blurted out, "but I've got to. I've been placed in this position—by circumstances—I've got to take the privilege—whether you let me or not."

He was making heavy weather of it but she was really curious now and his difficulties only made her angrier.

"Can't you go on?" she asked, contemptuously.

He put the dog down and sawed the air with his hands a moment.

"It's about your friend—this fellow Salazar," he said, explosively.

"Ah." The sound from her throat was at once a gasp of surprise, a sigh of relief.

"Jack!" She found a rigid dignity at her own mention of the name. Again the impulse to show her visitor the door—again rejected. "What have you got to say

about Jack Salazar?" she asked slowly, her words, her stare, both measured.

He met her look and seemed to have a sense of her sudden hostility. It stiffened him a little, but did not deflect him from his purpose.

"Well, I came here to tell you that he's not the man you take him to be—he's not worthy of you—of any decent girl. He's giving you what belongs to another woman."

"Oh, I see," she drawled, as she stared at him, but he held her interest now. She tried to make her tones as careless as the shrug that went with them. There were other women in Jack's past. Of course, she knew it. But it shocked her to hear them spoken of by this strange visitor.

"And how are Mr. Salazar's private affairs any business of yours?" she asked, acidly.

Her cold fury steadied him. "I'll tell you why," he went on. "Because his affairs have come into my own house and into my own life in a way that I can't let pass. I didn't want to get mixed up in them, I don't want to now. But there are some things that can't be ignored—for the sake of common decency."

"Explain!" she broke in quickly.

"I will," he gasped. And then more slowly. "Did you ever hear of Josie Brant?"

"No. I don't make a practice—"

"Well, I'm going to tell you about her now. She's in my house at Red Bridge. I found her by the canal. She was in a bad way. I took her home, because she was sick and hadn't any other place to go. This man Salazar asked her to marry him. Then betrayed her and left her.

She tried to get him to marry her. She trusted him. Believed in him. Just as you trust him and believe in him—”

“Really!” she broke in, “I think I’m quite capable—”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “She’s going to have a baby. She doesn’t know what to do. The affair just drifted on and on. First he promised to marry her, then he avoided her. And at last, when she insisted on his keeping his promise, he laughed at her, treated her brutally. She got sick, lost her job. When I found her she was desperate, without money or hope, ready to kill herself.”

“What have this woman’s troubles to do with me?” she asked, coolly.

He straightened, turned, his eyes blazing blue fire. If he had seemed fatuous before he was fanatic now. He went on passionately, and it was Tommy’s gaze that fell before his.

“I can’t believe you’re in sympathy with this kind of brutality. I won’t believe it. Even if you’re in love with a man like that—”

Tommy sprang to her feet away from him.

“Stop!” she cried. “I forbid you!”

He watched her while she paced up and down the room before him. “I thought you were queer but I didn’t think you were a fool. Nobody but a fool would dare to say the things you’ve said to me.” She turned on him violently. “Who told you I was in love with him? What business is it of yours whom I’m in love with? Why did you come messing in my affairs?”

He had risen and stood facing her.

“Because,” he said evenly, “I didn’t want to see you make the same mistake Josie Brant did.”

Her glance flashed fury, but there was bewilderment in it too, fury at his continued impudence, bewilderment at the tone of solicitude.

"Don't you realize how insulting you are? Don't you?" she asked tensely, trembling with rage. "Or can't you realize it? Haven't you any feeling that you've taken a liberty no woman could ever forgive?"

"No," he said, slowly, "I thought you—you were fine enough to understand." He paused, his voice dropping a note. "I—I still think so."

She went across to the table and leaned on it. His reply and the tone of it baffled her for the moment. When she spoke her voice was dry, hard and mechanical, not her own voice it seemed, but another.

"Why should you care," she asked, "whom I love or why?"

"Because," he said eagerly again, "you're worth saving from him, worth saving from yourself."

That was direct enough, insistent in its intimacy and frankness. And yet again it disarmed her.

"Thanks for the compliment." Her laugh, meant to be satirical, only succeeded in being neurotic. She had said that she was not hysterical but she was surprised at her own lack of self-control. Why should she be so disturbed by this preposterous visitor and his impudent message? Her nerves, none too certain for several weeks, were on the ragged edge of some sort of violence.

"Won't you—" she gasped—"won't you please go?"

He stared at her a moment and then bent his head in acquiescence—in acknowledgment of his failure.

"Oh—of course I'll go. I oughtn't to have come."

He crossed behind her and walked to the door. He

had almost passed into the small hallway when she spoke again quickly.

"Wait—wait!" And as he turned, "When did all of these things take place?"

"This winter—three months ago."

She raised her head quickly as if suddenly startled and came toward him. Her whole frame was compact with some new interest.

"You're sure of that?"

"Why, yes. Of course I'm sure. I'd have no object in lying to you. Now, would I?"

She glanced at his face and then slowly turned away. As she looked past him a dark flame danced in her eyes, a flame he thought from the embers of her fury. But that anger seemed to have passed.

"Who is this woman?" she asked, coldly.

"She was a ticket seller at a motion picture theater."

"Oh! And you're sure the affair began this winter?"

Something had changed her attitude, her tone of voice. He couldn't understand and still stood uncertainly.

"Yes. That's right. There are reasons why I remember—better reasons why Josie Brant does."

"Josie!" Her lips twisted unpleasantly. "A ticket seller—where?"

"At the Undine. But she has her rights. And her rights come before yours."

"And how are you going to get them for her?" she asked, ironically.

"I'm going to tell this man that he's got to marry her. That's why I came to New York."

"And if he won't?"

"Well, I—I'll have to see about that."

She stared at him with a new sense of his extraordinary persistence, also a sense of his quixotism upon this thankless and hopeless quest.

3

He heard a sound behind him and saw her glance pass him and harden. He turned. Salazar had entered and came forward slowly, appraising Randle.

"Just from the train," he was saying to Tommy. "I got through sooner than I thought I would. Why, what's the matter, Tommy?"

"You've met Mr. Randle," she said, coolly. "Perhaps he'll explain."

Peter had turned, now suddenly very full of his purpose. "Yes, I've been looking for you," he muttered. "I waited in your office for two hours this morning."

"Is that so?" Salazar's glance passed from Peter Randle to Tommy Keith, where it lingered for a moment in uncertain inquiry. Then he spoke to Peter: "And what can I do for you?"

There were perhaps in the city no two men more dissimilar than these. Salazar exhibited all the graces of a skillful social technique. He was a shade shorter than Randle but compact, lithe and deft in his motions. His eyes (which women so admired) were omniscient. He had, it seemed, the woman's instinct for antipathy, and before Randle spoke was already aware of a constraint in the situation not to be dissipated by the bright flash of his smile. He had noticed the visitor the night before at Jimmy Blake's but had not considered him a person of importance. He, therefore, concealed his surprise at

finding him with Tommy, and spoke with all the assurance in the world.

Peter frowned. Tommy stood silent, eying Salazar sharply.

"I—I came to see you in behalf of Josie Brant," Peter said brusquely.

He was so absorbed in the justice of his cause that words were mere bludgeons to be struck quickly. Salazar's gaze flickered for a second. Then found itself. Whatever happened between him and this man in any other place, this was a name not to be mentioned here.

"Josie Brant! I don't know what you're talking about," he said, glibly.

His assurance took Peter aback.

"Oh, don't you?" said Peter. "Well, I—I'll have to—I think we can correct that." He was fishing about in the inside pocket of his dinner coat and brought forth an envelope, soiled from much handling.

"It's rather stupid to say you don't know what I'm talking about," he said. He took a photograph from the envelope—a handsome photograph which Salazar immediately recognized. "Josie Brant gave me this. It's your picture. It has writing on the back—"

Salazar reached quickly, but Peter moved the card aside only to have it snatched from his fingers by Tommy who read in a loud supercilious tone, "For Josie—from her Sheik—"

Then she laughed. It was not pleasant laughter. Salazar looked at her, bit his lip and frowned.

The sudden collapse of Tommy's confidence through the revelation of this meddling stranger had taken him off his guard, rendering for the moment useless his casual

air of the conqueror. His mind was unequal to a sophistry to fit the case and the usual appeal of his voice and glance seemed to have lost savor. The man caught in a lie must be inventive to rescue himself in such an emergency. In the slack moment he fell back upon a platitude, spoken rather sullenly.

"A fellow can't remember the name of every girl he knows."

"You do admit that you know her, then?" asked Peter, quickly.

"I don't see how this happens to be any affair of yours," Salazar replied, coolly.

"That's just what I wanted to explain. That's why—"

"Is this the place to explain?"

"Yes," put in Tommy, quickly, thrusting forward. "Right here—now."

This surprised him. With Tommy aiding the aggressor he felt less and less assurance. He had seen her this way once before and had been at some pains to explain himself. But there were greater difficulties here.

"Oh, I see," he muttered.

Tommy leaned against a chair back, then turned quickly to Peter.

"Go on, Mr. Randle," she said.

Peter needed no encouragement.

"Josie Brant is in my house in the country. It doesn't matter how she came there. But there she is, I know her story and yours."

"And so do I," added Tommy.

Salazar looked from one to the other and shrugged. "Surely, Tommy," he said, "you can't intend me to discuss an old affair of mine like this with—with a stranger."

"Go on, Mr. Randle," said Tommy.

Peter turned toward Salazar.

"You asked me a minute ago how this happened to be any affair of mine, I'll tell you why, Mr. Salazar. Josie Brant asked me to see you in her behalf. Because Josie Brant has made it my affair. Because when a woman gives herself to a man under a promise of marriage he also gives himself to *her*. A marriage by nature is a marriage by God. You can't get around it. Josie Brant asked you to legalize this union—"

"Wait a minute," said Salazar, coolly. And then to Tommy: "And do you mean to say that you believe all the stuff this man is saying?"

"Yes," said Tommy, briskly, "I do."

"Without giving me a chance?"

"I'm giving you that chance now."

Salazar's eyes grew a shade darker. He was, as he knew, at bay, but his situation was not hopeless by any means, for Peter, though large in bulk, was not otherwise impressive. Salazar's little mind had the habit of judging by appearances. And Broadway had given him a shrewdness not to be equaled by any man who wore evening clothes that fitted as badly as Randle's did.

"All right," said Salazar, coolly. "I don't know what object this man has in coming to you and telling you this stuff. I did know Josie Brant. She was a nice little thing. I took her out a few times. But if she says that she has any claim on me, if she says I promised to marry her, she's a liar—"

Peter took a pace forward, his fist brandishing. "See here, you—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Randle," said Tommy. And then

to Salazar: "How long ago was it that you knew this girl?"

Salazar hesitated, then lied promptly. "Two—three years ago—"

"That's not true," said Tommy, "and you know it."

"Oh, no! no!" said Peter, waving his arms like flails. "I know all about it. This winter—less than three months. There's still time to save her from disgrace if you'll marry her at once."

The elements of the speech were preposterous as proof, but they were uttered with all the spontaneity of conviction. Tommy felt their truth as she would have done the sincerity of an ingenuous child, and to Peter's ingenuousness was added the power of his bulk and eagerness.

The attention of Salazar was so quickly focused upon Peter's last extraordinary suggestion that he forgot the terms of the previous argument.

"Marriage!" he exclaimed. And then laughed. "Marriage! Is this a joke?"

Peter stared at him.

"A joke? Do I look as though I were making a joke? I said marriage. That's what I mean. Marriage to Josie Brant—at once. If you're a man, you'll do the square thing. If you don't—well—I'll—I'll see about that."

Salazar glanced from one to the other, looking Peter impudently up and down. He had, like most of his kind, the very slightest elements of stability or of character. What unnerved him most was the thought of his pose, his swagger, his perfections falling to pieces before Tommy's eyes. The expression of conviction on Tommy's face made him desperate.

"You've done some talking, Mr. Randle," he said craftily. "Maybe you'll answer a question or two of mine. What's Josie Brant doing in your house? How did she get there and why? That's what I'd like to know. You say she came to you and told you this story. Well, suppose I admit I knew the girl. That doesn't let *you* out. I guess you're not as crazy as you look. You've got a game of your own to play. It's a pretty old game to try to work on me, and it won't do. You want me to marry this little—you want me to marry Josie Brant so that you won't have to."

This sudden attack from such an angle was so amazing to Peter that he stood for a moment staring. What he most wanted to do was to strike. But he was still conscious of the girl at his elbow who was listening so intently.

"Why—see here—you!" he gasped. "I took her in my house because she had no place to go. She's nothing to me. You're what she wants. You ought to know it. That's a filthy idea of yours. You need a thrashing, by God—"

Peter had lost all sense of his surroundings and only saw the pale regular features within reach of his arms. He took a pace forward when Tommy quickly stepped in front of him, seizing his arm.

"Mr. Randle! Stop! Do you hear?"

Peter paused, still glaring, aware of Tommy's hands holding him. But he spoke, again dominant—as though in his own house:

"Well, then, you get out of here," he gasped. "Get out quick. D'ye hear?"

Salazar had recovered his poise and smiled. "Miss

Keith—"he began, when Tommy spoke quickly, convincingly.

"Yes, go! That's right. Go. I'm sick of you."

Salazar stared at her. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. Yes. Go . . . !"

"I hope when you've had time to think this over—"

"Won't you go?"

Salazar frowned, smiled and then shrugged a shoulder.

"Oh, very well—if you mean it—" Tommy gave no reply and Salazar turned slowly toward the door. It was far from an imposing exit and yet he made it with a kind of grace.

She did not look away from Salazar until he disappeared. She stood, curiously enough, still holding Peter's arm and hand, until the door into the outer corridor closed. At the sound of the closing door Tommy tittered nervously. Peter looked down at her. Why should she be laughing now? She still held his arm with both hands as though she thought he might be preparing to follow Salazar into the corridor. She seemed smaller than he thought she was—almost as small as Josie, almost as unhappy.

"I—I'm sorry," he blurted out. "But you see—"

His voice broke the spell of abstraction and she released his arm, moving away.

"Yes—I understand."

Her head had drooped a little. Her hair was the color of the fall grasses shining in the sun. She did not have the appearance of the gay creature that he had met at Jimmy Blake's. A drooping moss rose. Her head came up quickly.

"I guess you'd better go too, Mr. Randle," she said.

Peter straightened. "Oh, yes, of course," and turned toward the door. Then as though he had forgotten something turned back and held out his hand.

"I—I hope you're not angry with me," he said, gently.

She glanced up at him, her eyes as hard and bright as brown agates.

"No—no. Not angry."

She looked down at his hand. It was large, brown and calloused like a working man's.

"I—I'm afraid I—I've made an awful mess of things—for you—for Josie—for everybody."

"For me—? I—"

She pressed his hand, then released it, turning quickly away. "I—I'm glad you came. But you'd better go now. Good-by."

Something was wrong with her voice. He stared for a moment. Was she going to cry? The thought of that alarmed him and he made quickly for the door.

CHAPTER IV

CROSS-LIGHTS

1

UNABLE to restrain her curiosity, Lola called at the Ritz early the following afternoon. Tommy was out. She waited and, to improve the passing moments, assiduously pumped Lucette, Tommy's French maid, learning of the arrival of John Salazar the night before upon the scene, where loud words had been spoken by the tall stranger, who at last had actually ordered "*ce beau Monsieur Salazar*" from the *appartement* of mademoiselle. It was *épatant* that a stranger should make so free of the *appartement*—that mademoiselle should permit that "*ce beau Monsieur Salazar*" should go.

But there it was, *enfin*, exactly what had happened. Was mademoiselle *désolée*? She did not know anything more except that mademoiselle was impatient and very, very cross when Lucette had attempted to brush her hair.

Lola waited at the Ritz for an hour but Tommy did not return. It was quite clear that Lola's expedient, born in a moment of inspiration and mischief, had been successful beyond all hope. Jack Salazar had been dismissed and Peter Randle, instead of having been thrown by Tommy down the elevator shaft, had emerged from the interview both unscathed and triumphant. Extraordinary! There might be something to this "absent-minded professor" that had escaped Lola's notice. She had had some doubts

as to her own part in the affair, for her telephone conversation had taken place without Fred Wingate's knowledge or connivance, but the results having justified the means she was now quite ready to tell Wingate everything. So instead of going to her apartment, she rang up Lablache, a picture dealer on Fifth Avenue where Wingate was sometimes to be found, and together they walked uptown to Wingate's hotel.

Before confessing, she asked him a few questions. Peter Randle, it appeared, had returned to the hotel very late. He had worn a thoughtful expression but, beyond the statement that he had gone for a long walk through the Park, had had nothing to say. He and Wingate had taken a drink of Scotch in Wingate's room and then Peter had gone to bed at once. But he had left the hotel in the morning, and had not returned. Then Lola told what she had found out at the Ritz, confessing her guilt and marveling at the success of the stratagem.

"I've got to take my hat off to your friend," she said, laughing. "I used to think I could size up a fellow by the way he did his parlor tricks, but I guess I must be getting feeble-minded or something. Peter Randle certainly put it over. And anybody who could put the skids under Salazar in Tommy's own apartment with Tommy looking on—well, he's just a kind of combination Machiavelli and cave man."

Wingate could not help smiling at the thought of Peter Randle with the qualities of either—and yet, there seemed no doubt that his evidence and arguments had been convincing.

"I told you that Peter was stubborn in his convictions," he said. "Peter's convictions aren't always your convic-

tions or mine and they're pretty sure as a rule to be unconventional—but he had the right on his side in this and he made Tommy see it.”

They paused a moment for the traffic of the cross street.

“I wonder where he is. Now that I know what happened last night I'm afraid he's following the thing up. You can't tell just what he'll do.”

“Well,” said Lola as they reached the hotel, “I wouldn't be surprised if he'd kidnaped Jack and taken him to Red Bridge in a taxi. Short of murder, that would be about the only thing that would satisfy him, I'd say.”

Wingate frowned as Lola paused at the entrance laughing. “I don't think this is a joke,” he said. “He's done all he can do. Of course, he can't make Salazar marry the girl. I'd better be getting him out of town as soon as possible. Won't you come in? We can have some tea. And I'll just ring up his room and see if he's come back.”

It was on the way to the tea room that they met Peter making his way to the elevators. He did not see them, being very intent upon his own affairs. But he was attracting a good deal of attention for his collar was torn, his hat was crushed, his face was swollen and he had one black eye.

Wingate seized him by the arm and guided him into a small unoccupied parlor close at hand, Lola following. Wingate noticed that he gave her his left hand but that his smile, though grotesque, was very sweet.

“How the devil did you get into this sort of shape, Peter?” asked Wingate.

“Oh, it's nothing—er—nothing at all,” Peter stam-

mered, grinning like a boy. "I was just going up to my room to dress."

"But you're hurt."

"Am I?" he asked. "Oh! my hand, yes. I—ah—barked my knuckles on the—ah—door of a taxi."

"Did the door of the taxi punch you in the eye too?"

"Er—no—I wasn't aware—"

"And your hat?"

Peter examined it with an air of abstraction, his thought elsewhere.

"When are you going back to Red Bridge?" he asked with abrupt simplicity.

Wingate's look was quizzical.

"I think we'd better both be going back in the morning," he replied.

"Yes. I think that will be all right," said Peter, nodding slowly.

Lola, intensely interested, listened to this conversation but could find no words to fit the situation. There was something about Peter Randle's manner, an air of composure, in spite of his injuries that gave her a definite impression that he had spent a satisfactory afternoon. Her curiosity was again intense but she saw no way to gratify it unless she questioned him. This seemed impossible. As Wingate had said, Peter had his dignity and Lola was now rather surprisingly aware of it.

After a moment, very politely, he made his excuses and left them staring after him.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Wingate with a grin.

"You've got to find out about this for me, Fred," Lola insisted eagerly. "You'd better go up. He may need something."

"Yes, perhaps. But I wonder what John Salazar needs."

"You think—"

Wingate made a grim smile, and then spoke cryptically. "Peter hasn't been chopping wood for three years for nothing," he muttered.

But it was not until some weeks later when Wingate visited New York again that Lola learned just what had happened that afternoon. Peter had been very reticent before leaving New York and only after he had been in Red Bridge for a week had Wingate succeeded in getting an idea of the affair. It did not seem to be a matter of which Peter was proud, for, having failed in the object of his visit to New York, which was to make Salazar see his duty to Josie as Peter saw it, the personal encounter with Salazar had only served to accentuate that failure. He had not wanted to discuss it with any one, but Wingate's interest and sympathy seemed to be so real that Peter at last answered his questions.

Peter, having called at Salazar's office many times, had at last been successful in finding his man. Peter had begun talking at once, in the presence of a number of people. Salazar had been angry at this invasion but was wise enough to comprehend that an airing of his personal affairs could do him no possible good in the office or elsewhere. He had therefore accepted Peter's suggestion that they go out to some quiet place where they could discuss the matter in private. But it was difficult to find a quiet place in the midst of five million people. Upon the street, Peter decided to be diplomatic and persuasive, thus destroying any unpleasant impression that he may have made in ordering Mr. Salazar from Miss Keith's rooms the night

before. Salazar listened, rather grim, while they both walked slowly across town. Peter tried with all the eloquence at his command, to demonstrate that he had no interest whatever in Josie Brant, who of course still loved only Salazar. But Salazar only smiled unpleasantly. He did not say much, but seemed to be listening very intently, now apparently undisturbed by Peter's presence, since they had reached a neighborhood beyond the horizon of Salazar's usual activities. His silence, Peter said, was annoying, his smile supercilious. There were many things about Salazar that Peter did not like. Peter discovered that he had, among other perfections, curling eyelashes. But Peter kept his temper in spite of rapidly growing prejudices. And when at last Salazar broke the silence with an ironic question as to Peter's purpose in walking him so far, at a great loss of valuable time, Peter's patience snapped like a dry stick. He told Salazar frankly that he expected him to marry Josie Brant. Salazar laughed at Peter as he had laughed at Josie and turned to go back. But Peter caught him by the shoulders and twisted him around, as though he had been a mechanical toy that had been started in a wrong direction.

Then Salazar struck Peter in the eye. They were standing at the mouth of an alley. Peter's rush must have carried them well within it for nobody, it seemed, at this time had taken any notice of the encounter. And so within the privacy of the alley was the combat waged until Peter, now violently aggressive, struck and struck until Salazar sank in a corner and refused to fight any more. But the mouth of the alley was soon gorged with people who seemed to have sprung like a sowing of dragon's teeth,

from the earth, armed with righteousness and inquiry. Only one phrase came from the mouth of the breathless Peter when the crowd surrounded him. It happened to be a fortunate phrase—"He insulted a woman." Words of sympathy and opprobrium followed while Salazar awoke to consciousness. And Peter, aware of a diversion in his favor, slipped down the alley before the arrival of the police, caught a taxi on the near-by avenue and made his way to his hotel. It was far from a glorious adventure in Peter's eyes but it had given him, upon Josie's account, a great deal of quiet satisfaction. Not that it had improved her position in the least, poor girl, and he had not even dared to tell her of the encounter, fearing that her anger might be added to her sorrow at the failure of his mission.

There were, in the whole sequence of events, elements of divine justice, and Wingate, not having been sworn to secrecy, considered it a part of his duty to manage that the story should reach Tommy Keith, rather picturesquely through the lips of his friend Lola, who was now a violent partisan of Peter.

2

As may have been discovered already, Tommy Keith belonged to the great army of imperfectly educated females which has taken possession of the world in the hope of changing its too somber music into syncopation. The intellectual resources of Scranton, Pennsylvania, had not been greatly taxed in her education. When Tommy was twelve, her mother had disappeared—to be no more mentioned in the house. Tommy tried to love her memory, but failed dismally. Her father adored his daughter, but

only in those few hours that could be spared from the exigencies of his business. So Tommy, like Topsy, just "grew."

But she felt that she was too pretty and too rich to waste her energies in the midland country. And when the war came, she persuaded her father to make his headquarters in New York. He chose the Ritz for his dwelling place and then died, leaving Tommy with three millions of dollars and a lively disposition, both extremely dangerous assets in a city whose energies are largely engaged in turning the assets of the weak into liabilities. She had no talents except that of making herself attractive and no ambitions except to have a good time, and it was not difficult for her to find others with the same proclivities. She could, perhaps, have been a hanger on of Society, with excellent matrimonial possibilities. But stilted and stodgy people had always annoyed her and she enjoyed her independence too much to think of marriage. Her Aunt Sophy had given her up in despair. Aunt Sophy did not, as Tommy averred, understand the modern woman. And so Tommy had gone her way, a path of excitement and pleasure, beset with danger.

Her attitude of mind, when she awoke the morning after Peter's visit, was balanced between astonishment and dismay. Astonishment that a man whom she had met but once should come to the hotel and order Jack Salazar from her rooms. Still further astonishment that she had accepted so readily the visitor's evidence and explanations. Dismay at the sudden destruction of her brazen idol and at the blow to her self-esteem that Peter Randle's revelations had inflicted. Tommy's philosophy, such as it was, revolved around the perfection of all things that were hers

—and the duty of those with whom she associated to respect them accordingly. Not much of a philosophy really, but a very real one to Tommy, who had been led to believe, by the acquiescent and acquisitive world in which she moved, that these things were all that should matter to a pretty girl with an income of a hundred and twenty thousand a year. She had made Jack Salazar a part of these perfections and she expected from him the sort of adulation and loyalty that she always exacted and received from those who enjoyed her favors.

She could, perhaps, have forgiven him anything but this, for he was very beautiful. The fact that their relation was bound by no laws or promises had made his obligation to her so much the greater. His violent attentions and her acceptance of them were tacit admissions of that obligation. The bare facts were these: She had been beguiled, fooled, deceived for a common ticket seller at the Undine—and all this had happened during the winter while Jack Salazar had been winning past the boundaries that she had marked for him! There was her humiliation and shame. She remembered rather dizzily how near she had been once or twice to complete forgetfulness. . . . Fool that she was! In the eyes of Peter Randle almost as much of a fool as Josie Brant, the ticket seller, herself. For he had said so.

She got out of bed slowly, aware that some sort of a crisis had come to her affairs. A physical crisis that involved the tendencies of her body—a spiritual crisis that involved the habits of her mind.

It was the same world, of course. There was still her money, typified by the extravagances and luxuries of her dressing room. There was still the sun in the usual pink

lozenge on the old rose couch by the window and there was still Lucette holding her silk dressing gown and ready to prepare her for the bath. But something was changed in it all. The old flavor was out of it. The sunlight was unfriendly and her mirror refused to flatter—a kindly mirror after nightfall. She seemed to see with a prophetic vision exactly what she would look like at forty. Forty! And she was only twenty-six! It seemed the very first time in her life that she had actually looked at herself face to face. She was sure that she hated Jack Salazar. She was through with him. She would never see him again. Beast! And only night before last. . . .

But her bath revived her and in her kimono she dared to look again into the mirror. Reassured she smiled experimentally, and with success. She had been a fool, of course—a fool about a man because he had been good to look at. It was strange that she could ever have thought that beauty was all that she required of Jack Salazar or of any man. This morning she remembered that he had been far from beautiful as he faced the wrath of her visitor, Mr. Peter Randle.

It was very curious and very astonishing how from anger at the insults of this Peter Randle, she could have been turned, by a phrase, into his violent partisan—curious that she should have listened with satisfaction and approval as Peter Randle had ordered Jack Salazar from the room. Randle had entered her apartment as a casual and unconventional visitor from whom she might gain some amusement. He had left it still unconventional but no longer casual. At a stride he had achieved the dignity of an avenging fate. There were, she began to think, elements of the miraculous in his intervention in her af-

fairs. For she had been in a frame of mind that threatened danger. . . .

Her ideas as to Peter were, however, mingled with wonder. On the night at Jimmy Blake's she had thought of him as a large and rather perplexed Saint Bernard, torn between the impulses to bark and to wag his tail. This morning he seemed more like an amiable fireman who had appeared suddenly outside her window on a ladder and awkwardly rescued her from the flames. There was something apt rather than merely amusing in the picture. The flames were fortunately extinguished and the damage not beyond repair, but it was rather astonishing to discover that it had required the appearance of the fireman to make her aware that her house was on fire. She no longer thought of Peter Randle as merely amusing. He was now less a personality than a prodigious fact that had been thrust upon her, saving her in spite of herself from a great folly. But for the present she had no desire to see Peter Randle, for he had been the witness of her humiliation. This morning, indeed, she did not wish to see any one, and so when she was dressed she went out briskly on a round of shopping, for in this occupation she usually found the opportunities to forget her difficulties.

3

After many chilling evasions spring had actually come, for the forsythia and red gum trees were already proclaiming it in the Park. Tommy had bought a new run-about, a red, two-passenger affair, low, raffish and of great length and swiftness, and in this vehicle she frequently drove forth, into the country. Her companion, this morn-

ing, was Lola Oliver and their destination nowhere in particular, which meant usually a late luncheon in Westchester or on Long Island and a speedy exhilarating drive homeward in the late afternoon. Several weeks had passed since the dismissal of Jack Salazar and Tommy had already decided that she had forgotten him. He had called again and again and she had refused to see him. He had written her impassioned notes, rather badly spelled, and she had paid no attention to them. They had met at Jimmy Blake's and she had turned her back upon him.

The new car attracted much attention especially from the traffic policeman, but Tommy, aided by the experience of frequent fines, had learned to gauge by a hair's breadth the limits of their endurance and the persuasive possibilities of her smile. Beyond the city, they moved rapidly and were soon in a region of detached houses and farm lands where the going was good and motor policemen were not in evidence.

Her speed mania gratified for the moment Tommy relaxed and listened to Lola's gossip. Tommy had at first been disposed to be resentful of the liberty that Lola had taken in sending Peter Randle to her apartment. But Lola had only laughed at her. And when Tommy learned how much Lola really knew about everything she decided that she could not afford to be on anything but good terms with this friend, who after all, though intrusive, had had Tommy's best interests at heart. At the moment, too, she needed Lola's keen viewpoint on life, which helped her to put her own affairs into their proper perspective. But Frederick Wingate had added something to Lola's information as to Peter Randle and

Tommy's companion was charged, like a soda fountain, with delectable flavors.

Lola had a fine sense for dramatic effect but her forte was ironic comedy and the story of Peter Randle's pursuit of Jack Salazar and their subsequent combat afforded her art of narration an unusual opportunity. This was a part of her revenge upon Tommy for her reticence in replying to Lola's questions about Peter Randle's visit. She began with the meeting with Peter Randle at the hotel, and his damaged appearance as the result of an unusual encounter with the door of a taxicab. Then, with art and humor, described what had actually happened and why Peter, his mission a failure, had suddenly departed for Red Bridge. She knew that the most formidable enemy of passion is ridicule and she painted in details that glowed with color, the picture of the unfortunate Salazar, despoiler of women, rescued from his ash heap in the alley and the anathema of the scornful crowd.

Tommy listened in silence, preoccupied with the driving wheel. But when Lola had finished talking she laughed. Lola was satisfied with that laugh for it had a careless ring. Then for a while Tommy kept her toe on the accelerator and in the rush of wind there was no opportunity for conversation or even for thought. Lola waited, tensely gripping the arms of her seat, trying to think that she was not frightened. But at last, as they came to a village, with a series of staccato salutes from the back fire, the pace became slower. Tommy grinned and spoke.

"Well, it's funny, Lola, how things happen in this world. I was so crazy about myself that it never entered my head that Jack Salazar couldn't be just as crazy as

I was. It was about time I woke up. Oh, I'm awake all right. And I guess I owe that to you."

"Oh, I don't mind taking the credit. But then you can't afford to forget Peter Randle."

"That man!" said Tommy with another laugh. "I can't forget him. I wish I could. It's not pleasant to think about any man who believes you to be a poor, weak, silly fool. That's what Peter Randle thinks I am."

"*Was*, my dear," Lola corrected.

"But I like him, Lola. Queer, isn't it? To want the good opinion of a freak like that. I guess it's just because he's the only one but you who guessed how big a fool I was." She paused a moment and then asked: "Did Fred Wingate say anything about what happened when he got back home?"

"No. Nothing."

"What sort of a creature is this Josie Brant?"

Lola gave a shrug. No other reply seemed necessary.

"Well, Fred Wingate must have said *something* about her."

"He did. She's playing the game. No place to go but out. So she's learning to make cinnamon buns."

"Cinnamon buns, why?"

"Because as near as I can make out they're Peter Randle's staple article of diet."

Tommy turned and then looked down the winding ribbon of road. "Yes," she said, slowly, "Peter Randle *would* like cinnamon buns."

"Queer taste, I'd say, but the idea does make you hungry somehow." Lola glanced at her wrist watch.

"Let's eat, Tommy. Do you know it's after two?"

They found a tea house at the next village where they

got out and had lunch. Over the cigarettes there was another moment of confidences.

"What do you really think," Tommy asked Lola, "about Peter Randle and this Brant woman? Living in the same house, I mean—away off in the country. You know Jack Salazar said that Peter Randle was just trying to get him to marry the girl so that *he* wouldn't have to. You don't believe that, do you?"

Lola's smile was not the cynical one that she employed for most of the gossip that she heard. There was real amusement in it.

"What would *you* think?"

"I—I don't know," said Tommy.

Lola moved her hand with an air of conviction. "Well, you know, I'm not in the habit of throwing any bouquets at the men folks, when it comes to *that*. But it's my little guess that this bird, Peter Randle, doesn't know that there's anybody unusual around the house. He's a—er—whacherm'callem—idealist—and that means not having any ideas that haven't got wings on 'em. I actually believe that if a girl held his hand for fifteen minutes he'd think he was having a European honeymoon."

"No, I don't believe that. I held his hand for a minute and he didn't even know I was there."

"Well, you were not an object for sentiment, just charity, just a poor little rich girl with more money than brains."

"That's a little too true to be funny," said Tommy reflectively.

Lola bent forward and laid her hand impulsively over Tommy's.

"You've got brains. If you hadn't, even I wouldn't make a joke of it. I guess you'll do, Tommy."

CHAPTER V

AT RED BRIDGE

1

SPRING. In the orchards of the Delaware Valley, the cherry blossoms were out, pink and pale violet against the velvet hills, with the river running bright blue between; tender green shoots at the tips of the maple boughs, as though nature were deftly laying in an outline on the great canvas just to show how fine the composition of the picture would be; gray rocks in the orchards dappled with sunlight beneath the boughs; early birds flying high following the course of the river to the north; bright clouds scumbled over the blue with wide brush strokes; perfume in the air and the yeasty smell of newly turned earth; movement, life, color—all strained through some invisible silver mesh to give them delicacy and charm; the allegro in the symphony of the seasons, announcing the theme of joy and repeating it in a hundred variations.

Red Bridge, after its long period of hibernation, had awakened and was already active about the business of the crops. The artist colony along the Delaware, taking advantage of the fine weather and the unusual color in all growing things, had emerged from its studios and sought the upland hills for the vistas of river and dell below. Frederick Wingate and Peter Randle were painting in a field above the scattered group of houses that they called the village; Wingate at work on a large can-

vas of the orchard above the Red Lion Hotel with the roof tops and river beyond, Peter facing the other way, painting a lichen-covered rock, with Simon Kreider's orchard and red barn. Wingate's canvas, a thirty-forty, was almost finished, in four hours of the afternoon. Peter's, much smaller, was still in the experimental stage. From time to time the older man had strolled over to Peter making suggestions, and Peter had nodded and gone on working.

The sun had sunk so low that the light had changed and Wingate took the canvas from his easel and packed his paint rags and brushes. Peter glanced at him, sighed, and slowly followed his example.

Since the conversation about the fight with Salazar, Peter had offered no information about Josie Brant, who still continued to live in Peter's house, enjoying an anomalous position—something between a volunteer maid of all work and a valued guest. Wingate asked no questions. He knew that sometimes Miss Brant went up to the village for the groceries, stopping at the rural delivery box on the road for the mail and of course, as he had predicted, all Red Bridge was talking. Such a choice morsel of gossip as Peter had provided for its delectation was not to be ignored in a community which is housed all winter and has for its chief items of interest, the price of groceries at Small's General Store, the minor injuries of cattle on adjacent farms, or as rare events, the passing of the oldest inhabitant or the birth of a new baby up at the crossroads. Mr. Sam Small was always very polite to Josie when he waited on her. In fact, he always waited on her himself in the vague hope that some phrase of hers would reward his efforts and give him possession of a

clue, no matter how slender, that would enable him to justify his position as purveyor extraordinary of items of information that would be of interest to all. For gossip made his store homelike and popular, drawing custom that might otherwise be deflected to the Tea Company's store, his only competitor in Red Bridge. But Miss Brant was always very quiet and self-possessed, answering his questions about Peter's health very politely but in short phrases that were not encouraging to conversation.

At the dry goods store, where she had already made some modest purchases, the attitude toward the stranger's presence in the village was less polite and more critical, for here reigned Johanna Shank, the owner and proprietor, a woman with opinions of her own upon most matters. Mrs. Shank had shown a florid, indignant attitude toward the affront that had been offered to a virtuous community. At the store, too, were her daughter Augusta and another clerk, Janet Kearns, who though frigidly polite, secretly envied the visitor her poise and worldly air. But the visitor seemed to be unaware of the curiosity and comment her visits caused or else indifferent to them.

More significant, perhaps, was the point of view of the Misses McVitty, elderly spinsters and friends of Frederick Wingate and of Peter Randle. These ladies lived in their ancestral stone house on the hill above the bridge and because of their independent means were the leaders of opinion among the older residents of the village and countryside. Peter Randle, whom they had accepted as a friend, in spite of his many eccentricities, had been a frequent guest at Riverview for Sunday dinner and for tea. Therefore, the story that had come to them from

Johanna Shank about the visitor to Peter's island had both amazed and shocked them. Miss Charlotte McVitty, the elder, and more acidulous, of the sisters, had flounced out of Shank's store with the promise that she would "see Frederick Wingate about it."

She had lost no time in carrying out her purpose, and Wingate had told her the truth, only concealing the unfortunate love affair of Miss Brant. To his regret, his statement was not given proper credence, for Miss McVitty alleged at once with conviction that Wingate had invented an excellent story to protect his friend, Peter Randle, and that artists as a rule were not to be relied upon. Wingate had been very good-natured about it, recalling instances of Peter's eccentricity and defending him again very heartily against the charges that the village was bringing against him. But the elder Miss McVitty departed unconvinced and with the expressed intention of cutting Peter Randle's further acquaintance.

When she had left the house Wingate grinned after her. The opinions of the Misses McVitty could matter very little to him or indeed to Peter, but they showed definitely the current of opinion against Peter and his guest. It was none of Wingate's affair, of course, and he didn't choose to make it so, but the talk was nothing less than he had expected; for little towns, more than big ones, have their little dignity to defend at all costs.

This interview had taken place on the previous afternoon, a rainy one, when Wingate had been confined to the studio. But he didn't mention it to Peter, though he was very sure that Miss Charlotte McVitty would see to it that somebody else did. The two men trudged across

the field to the road where they paused for a moment before separating to go their ways.

"How's everything at the house?" Wingate asked.

"All right, Wingate, all right," Peter replied.

Wingate paused a moment, waiting for Peter to go on, but he said nothing more.

"Well, so long, Peter."

"Good night."

Wingate had provided the moment for confidences, if Peter had chosen to avail himself of it, but there had been no response. Peter shambled down the hill to the road while Wingate turned up the road which led toward his home and studio. It seemed rather curious that Peter, after having taken him so fully into his confidence about Josie Brant and Jack Salazar, should have said nothing more about the visitor. His air of abstraction, Wingate thought, had, for several days, been more marked than usual and it was evident that he had decided to speak no more of his household to any one, not even to his friend and professional adviser. Wingate had not been to Peter's studio since his return from his last visit to New York, but Peter, it seemed, was still completely under the spell of his sense of obligation to Josie Brant, a sentiment that Wingate did not share. The visitor was not, in his opinion, Peter's sort of woman, though what sort of woman *was* Peter's sort was more than Wingate could decide. In his calls at Peter's house, between his visits to New York, he had a renewed impression of a sort of veiled hostility between Josie Brant and himself. He had at first thought that this might be mere fancy with its origin in his own knowledge of the woman's history; and yet Wingate had lived much in the world and he was in-

clined to share his friend Lola's opinion that there is a kind of nobility in the sacrifices of a woman for the man she loves.

*Aimer pour être aimé, c'est de l'homme;
Aimer pour aimer, c'est presque de l'ange.*

No, his prejudices, such as they were, had been based upon something more subtle than the unfortunate results of Josie's misguided love affair. Narrow glances had passed between them—slow, appraising ones from Wingate, quick, suspicious ones from Josie as though she saw in Peter's visitor a man of the world who might in his omniscience judge her harshly. She did not like him, he was sure, and he was very much disposed to return her sentiments. He had not known, nor did he now know anything of her purposes or plans for the future, though it seemed very necessary for Peter's sake as well as her own that her visit be concluded very soon. Unless, of course, Peter. . . . But that idea was absurd. For Peter was no squire of dames, at his worst a dupe of Josie's sophistries, at his best, her good Samaritan. But the whole thing was most unusual, and upon Peter's part more than a little stupid.

As Wingate climbed the road, he met Edgar Frear with his painting kit coming down from the hills. Frear was one of the younger men, and possessed, as Peter did, enough money to be independent of his artistic successes. But he had a superficial gift of painting what people liked and sold his paintings at good prices at the dealers'. Wingate did not admire his work, which was a little too facile to be quite sincere. That quality, too, was reflected in Frear's own personality. He had recently married

the daughter of a very excellent Philadelphia family, a thin, narrow-lipped girl who thought herself just one stripe above any one in Red Bridge, and had managed to convey that unpleasant impression. Frear lowered his painting outfit to the ground in token of the desire to talk and Wingate stopped.

"What's this about the girl at Randle's?" Frear asked. "Mrs. Shank told my wife last night that she's still there."

"Yes, that's so," said Wingate, shortly.

"Well, I like Peter Randle and I don't care how many girls he has in his house but the women take a different slant on this sort of thing. Mrs. Frear says—"

"Now see here, Frear," put in Wingate. "Are you talking for Mrs. Frear or for yourself?"

Edgar Frear frowned. "I suppose I'm talking for Mrs. Frear. You'll have to admit that this stunt of Randle's is pretty raw in a place like Red Bridge. We're not in Paris, Wingate, or even New York. My wife resents it—"

"Why?"

"Because it's a small community and we have to see one another pretty often. We like Peter Randle—but we don't know this Miss Brant—"

Wingate stared at him in silence as he paused.

"And we don't want to know her," Frear finished, decisively. "I'm speaking plainly because I'm trying to avoid anything unpleasant happening if Randle and Miss Brant should meet my wife."

"Oh, I see," said Wingate, shouldering his pack. "Has Peter Randle told you he was going to bring Miss Brant to call?"

"No, of course not. But—"

"Then what are you worrying about?"

"I didn't say that I was worrying. But I know something about this Josie Brant and I might as well tell you. Mrs. Frear has her washing done up at the cross-roads. This Josie Brant used to come down and stay with an aunt, Mrs. Cathcart. But she's no good. She went off to New York with a young fellow from Milestown. Peter Randle is making a big mistake taking a woman like that into his house. I thought as you were his friend—"

"I *am* his friend," said Wingate, brusquely. "Peter Randle took this girl into his house out of pity. He's keeping her there out of pity. You and Mrs. Frear can believe that or not as you choose. But I'm not going to butt into anything that isn't my business and I'd advise you to take the same attitude. Good night, Frear."

And Wingate went on up the road perplexed and a little angry that the Frear family in so many words had justified his own judgment as to Josie Brant. He was provoked at the constant necessity for defending, against his will, Peter Randle's curious hospitality and just a trifle bored with the whole business.

2

Peter went down the hill to the road, followed it to the wooden bridge over the canal, then struck the shorter walk down the towpath toward the island. He had not been exhilarated by his work this afternoon as he sometimes was. Perhaps it was the tremendous force of Fred-

erick Wingate's achievement that had overpowered him. He admired Wingate's power and sincerity. But Wingate's canvases, for all their beauty, were literal. Peter was trying for something that Wingate lacked; and in spite of almost constant failure he had already succeeded several times in getting the poetry of the thing that he had painted. As Wingate had said, in his affection for the little things Peter had often lost the significance of the big ones. This afternoon he had failed rather dismally. He had made an unfortunate choice of subject and his composition had been wrong—two mistakes that Wingate seldom made. He was therefore very much discouraged.

He went down the path to the bridge, where he was met, as usual, by the dog pack which rushed out barking at the sounds of footsteps among the dry leaves and then accompanied him with ostentatious marks of approval to the house. This cheered him a little. But when he reached the studio he unstrapped his canvases and in the relentless north light set up the picture that he had been painting and examined it critically. Yes. It was bad. As bad as possible— He opened his paint box slowly, took out his palette knife and quickly scraped out the result of his afternoon's work. Then he wiped his knife and threw the paint rag into a box in the corner.

Peter had a keen sense for the exact value of his achievements, scraping out, or painting over such things as had not come up to his expectations. He knew that he learned as much from failure as from success, but failures are not stimulating. And so, having eradicated the evidences of his unsuccessful afternoon, he took out

from a pile of canvases a twenty-five-thirty which he set up in a frame on the easel—a view of the town, river and bridge from the hill above McVitty's. There was color in it, not Wingate's color, but his own; the shimmer of light upon the water, air and light in the glow upon the distant hills and all broadly painted with something of a manner that was getting to be his own. He had done it in two afternoons since his visit to New York. Wingate had not seen it yet, but he did not need Wingate's approval to know that it was good, the best thing perhaps that he had ever done. And so after a while, having restored his confidence in his own ability, he closed the studio and went up to his room where he washed and changed into other clothes for supper.

When he came down into the sitting room Josie Brant was not there. At the kitchen door Martha, the cook, informed him that "Miss Josie" had gone for the mail and papers but had not returned. Martha and her employer were very good friends. Martha was stout, of comfortable middle age, a widow, and the color and texture of a highly polished horse-chestnut. She had been cook in Peter's house ever since he had come to Red Bridge, treated him sometimes as a child and at others as a god. But she understood the simplicity of his mind which was much like her own and was very willing to believe that everything he did was right. Peter did not know and it hadn't occurred to him to ask Martha's opinion of Josie's protracted visit to the house. He knew that she had a good heart and upon the night of the visitor's arrival, exhausted, friendless and ill, had done everything in her power to make her comfortable. They had seemed to get along all right since then, for Josie's

wish to help around the house relieved the colored woman of many of the tasks that had been hers before her arrival, and this, of course, was a cause for rejoicing.

But to-night at Peter's appearance Martha glanced out of the window and turned to Peter with an air of disclosures.

"Come in yer, Mist' Peter, please, suh."

Peter obeyed uncertainly. Martha glanced out of the window again.

"I reckon it's none of my business, Mist' Peter. But I made up my mine you gwine hear what people in dis hyer town sayin' 'bout you an' Miss Josie."

"Ah!" exclaimed Peter, softly.

"Yes, suh. It make me so mad I could scratch dey eyes out. I met dis hyer cook works fo' Miss Kreider an' she asks me 'bout Miss Josie, who she is, whar her people, what she doin' in yo' house. An' I tole her mine her business—dat Miss Josie she sick an' you tuk her in out of kineness of heart. But dat weman ain't satersfy, Mist' Peter. She say people in dis hyer town talkin' 'bout you. She say dey mad, you bringin' Miss Josie in yo' house. She try make me b'lieve I ain't got no right stayin' while Miss Josie hyer. Sho!"

Peter's face had set in grim lines while he listened. "And what else did you say to her, Martha?" he asked.

"Oh, I just tole her mine her own business, Mist' Peter, and tell Miss Kreider an' all dem folks yo' ain't got no smutty mine like dey is. It make me mad, Mist' Peter, hear dem folks talk 'bout you dat-a-way."

"Thank you, Martha," said Peter, "I feel sure I can rely on you—always."

"Yas, suh," said Martha, slowly. "But I ain't sho it's

right fo' you to be fixed so dese hyer folks *kin* talk 'bout you dat-a-way."

"Oh, don't you, Martha?"

The colored woman wagged her head uncertainly.

"I 'speck you ain't never tho't 'bout dat yo'se'f, is you, Mist' Peter?"

"Yes," said Peter, slowly. "I've thought about it."

"Oh! Is you? Well. If you done tho't 'bout it I ain't got nothin' mo' to say. Nothin' 'tall."

She turned back to her work while Peter looked out of the window in deep thought. At the stove Martha turned again.

"Maybe you ain't tho't might seem kinda funny to some folks," she added.

Peter walked slowly toward the door. "Yes, I've thought about that too, Martha." He passed through the sitting room and out of doors where sounds from the dogs soon announced Josie's return.

With his air of abstraction Peter waited for her to approach. The month in the country had done something pleasant to her appearance. Since she had been at Red Bridge she had worn no cosmetics or artificial coloration. After her walk to the village her eyes shone brightly and there was a branching of color through the texture of her cheeks. She had retrieved from somewhere a trunk, but the clothes that she wore, a white shirt-waist, and light brown jacket and skirt, though well made, had none of the marks of Broadway ostentation. She wore a small dark hat with a touch of scarlet on it.

A woman may dress in old and somber garments; poverty, ill health and misfortune may pursue her, but everything else failing, she will not relinquish the touch of per-

sonality to be expressed in her hat. Josie Brant's hat with its touch of scarlet was pulled well down over her ears, almost concealing one eye. It was not a new hat but she wore it with an air of assurance as to its success. Her shoes, too, of brown suède (now rather muddy from her walk along the towpath) were ornamented by a number of little straps with shiny buckles and proclaimed definitely their metropolitan origin. She smiled as she came nearer, a smile with the lips only. Her eyes did not change. Their lids, slightly tilted upwards at the outer corners, did not seem amenable to light spontaneous emotion. But her teeth were even and white and the picture that she presented was ingratiating. She was pretty in a way, though her features were unconventional. But Peter was a landscape painter and the beauty of women was not his métier. If he noticed her physical attractions, he performed the act of observation with some single isolated brain cell, the functions of which were almost obsolescent and entirely mechanical. All that he knew was that this was Josie Brant, the refugee from a rainy night and her own desperate misfortunes.

Something in the way Peter was looking at her made her pause uncertainly.

"What's the matter, Mr. Randle?"

"Oh—er—nothing. Nothing at all."

She handed him his morning New York newspaper and the mail and went into the house. After a moment of thought he put the papers on the table in the sitting room and slowly crossed to the door of the dining room where Josie, with a glance into the kitchen and a word with Martha, had begun to set the table. Peter watched the red thing on her hat for a moment, shifting uncom-

fortably from one foot to the other. Then he closed the kitchen door.

"Oh, say, Josie," he said, "I want to know—is everybody all right to you up in the village?"

She paused, a plate arrested in the air, her head turning with a quick, almost surreptitious, motion.

"Why, yes," she said after a pause. "Sure they are. I never give them a chance to be anything else."

"Well, I just thought I'd ask you. Pretty narrow lot, those small town people."

"Yes, they're that, all right. You might think I was the new school-teacher from all the questions Sam Small keeps asking."

"Not impertinent questions?"

"Oh, no. I guess *not*. He's just a smart Alec, that's all."

"Well, I want you to tell me if anybody is impolite to you."

"Oh, they're just curious, I guess."

Josie gave Peter another quick glance and moved from the cupboard to the table, placing the vinegar cruet and the salt and pepper.

"No, they're not rude, if that's what you mean. But I guess it's not often a strange dame comes tripping down the pike from the crossroads. They don't know anything about me, of course, and that's what makes them sore." She shrugged a shoulder and went slowly around the table straightening things. "I guess they'd be sorer yet if they knew the truth," she finished more somberly.

Peter was very sorry for her. She seemed so irresponsible and so helpless. He saw that he would have to do her planning for her.

"I've been thinking, Josie," he said slowly, "people are talking about—about you being here in my house. There's always a lot of busybodies trying to mix up in other people's affairs. And I think I—I oughtn't to be—to be so selfish about you—"

She glanced up at him quickly, her eyes shining with presentiment.

"Selfish? You?" she gasped.

"Yes. I—I mean about keeping you here in the house when people are talking about you. I've got to—to think of your reputation—a woman's reputation is a very—ah—perishable thing and I'm afraid I've done you an injury in placing you—ah—in a position that people might not understand. I was just thinking that perhaps I ought to get you a room and board somewhere—the Red Lion perhaps—or up at Horton's Ferry where you could be comfortable until. . . ."

Peter having managed to get his thoughts and tongue into perfect coördination was speaking more rapidly and with the assurance that his plea had every merit to commend itself, when suddenly in the midst of his remarks the woman at the mantel bent her head upon her arms and burst into a violence of tears. He was astounded, fixed to the spot by the distressing sounds. And he managed to reach her side, his hands patting her shoulder as though she had been one of his injured dogs.

"Why, Josie!" he said, soothingly. "Josie! You—you mustn't do that. What have I done? I—I wouldn't say anything to hurt you for the world."

The shoulder under his finger hove with sobs and from beneath her arms came a voice in smothered accents:

"I—I—didn't think—that you—you—would want me to go away from here—"

The genuineness of her sorrow was dismaying, like the grief of a thwarted child. He patted her shoulder again stiffly, in token of his embarrassment.

"You can't believe that, Josie!—that I want you to go away from here. I don't. You're feeling so much better than you did and you seemed so happy."

"I w—was. I—I am," came her voice.

"Well, that's all right. I—I just thought that you might be unhappy again if people kept on talking about you the way they're doing."

Her face came up, flushed, tragic, the moisture shining on her high cheek bones. She looked haggard, he thought, but very pathetic.

"Who's been talking?" she asked, doggedly.

"Oh, a woman spoke to Martha. There must be others."

"Oh!" she gasped. She bent her head into her arms, again muttering with what seemed to Peter to be a sort of desperation.

"I guess I—I had it coming to me. And I—I've gone and got you into it."

"No," protested Peter with a suavity gained from his fear of a recurrence of the outbreak. "It doesn't matter. I—I'm just thinking about you. It—it doesn't make any difference to me of course. I—I don't mind your being here at all—ah—I rather like it—er—especially as you seemed to be so happy after all your trouble."

"But—but you said you wanted me to go—away," she protested, and he noted the tears still in her voice, "to the

Red Lion—to board. You want to get rid of me. I ought to have known that people would talk. But I was so happy here I didn't care what they said or—or what they thought. But I don't want to go away—not yet, Mr. Randle. Please don't send me to the Red Lion.” She raised her head again, one hand clasping his arm. “Not yet—please. I—I don't care what people think—if you don't.”

Peter took the hand in his, looked at it, then dropped it as though he didn't know what to do with it. He paced the length of the room and back violently.

“I don't give a damn what they think,” said Peter, indignant at the people of Red Bridge who had made this woman cry. “I don't give a damn. That settles that. If you don't care, I don't. You can stay here as long as you please. You're not going away from here until you're well again and—ah—we find something for you to do. You're my guest in this house and you're going to stay here as long as you want to, no matter what they say.”

She straightened and turned toward him.

“Do you mean that, Mr. Randle?”

“Yes. It's all right. But don't cry any more. I hate to see women crying.”

“You don't know,” she said again, “how happy you've made me.”

“That's fine,” said Peter, smiling jovially again. “That's bully.”

She smiled at him through her tears and then with a sudden motion which took him unawares, she seized his hand, pressed it quickly to her lips and fled up the stairs to her room.

Peter stared after her in bewilderment. He heard her footsteps overhead. The thought uppermost in his mind was that this woman had shown her gratitude to him like a dog that had licked his hand. He went out of doors to the bench in the dusk.

After a while Martha's voice called him for supper and he went in to the table, where he stood waiting for Josie.

"Miss Josie she say she don't want no supper, Mist' Peter," said Martha.

So Peter sat. He was usually hungry after painting out of doors but to-night he ate slowly, frowning at his dish. After a while Josie came down, filled her plate in the kitchen and sat demurely in her place. Her eyes were downcast and her cheeks discolored with her weeping. He was very sorry for her. She was, he thought, one of those women who are the very darlings of misfortune. She said nothing, eating with a melancholy air. Peter finished his dessert and pushed his chair back from the table.

"I don't have to bother what people in this town think, Josie. You don't either. Now don't you let them bother you any more. Understand?"

"I'll try not to, Mr. Randle," said Josie.

After supper Peter put the dogs in the sheds and then instead of going to the studio to prowl around among his canvases as was his habit, he brought a rocking-chair up to the lamp of the sitting room, lighted his pipe and opened his New York paper. Josie finished washing the dishes and then came in and sat at the other side of the table with Martha's work basket, containing Peter's socks. Peter glanced up at her, smiled and went on read-

ing. The storm had passed, leaving the slightest traces of its violence. Josie picked up a sock and began darning. It was a scene domestic and virtuous. The stairs creaked heavily as Martha went up to bed. Outside, a dog barked, others took up the chorus and then were silent. Peter dozed, his head to one side and his paper slipping to the floor. Josie darned steadily, glancing from time to time at Peter with eyes that had resumed their brightness. Upon the table at his elbow was the mail, that Josie had brought from the mail box, unopened. There was a letter with a New York postmark and a monogram that had excited Josie's curiosity, for it was square, addressed to Peter in a woman's hand and had an odor of sachet. Josie already knew that Peter was from New York and that correspondence from that city might be expected, but this envelope was feminine and expensive.

"You haven't looked at your mail, Mr. Randle," she suggested as he straightened.

"Mail?" he said, sleepily. "Oh, yes. Why didn't you tell me?"

She laughed. "I gave it to you two hours ago."

"Oh, yes, of course, so you did."

He picked up the letter, turned it over in his fingers, examined the monogram and, while Josie watched him, at last opened it and read:

Dear Mr. Randle:

I suppose you'll be surprised to hear from me, because now that you're back at Red Bridge working hard, you don't get much time to think of your frivolous acquaintances in little old New York. But I've been thinking of writing to you for

some time and haven't succeeded in getting courage to do it until this minute.

Well, I just thought I wanted you to know that I'm not angry with you about what happened in my apartment. Instead of being angry I ought to be *grateful* and I really am. I needed somebody to wake me up—about Jack Salazar, I mean—you did *that*, all right. And I thought I'd like to tell you that I haven't seen him again to speak to and I *never will*. I'm writing to tell you all this because I want to have your good opinion. I know you thought I was an awful fool. I guess I was, but I'm not any more. So far as I'm concerned Jack Salazar might be dead and buried. I guess you buried him for me, Mr. Randle, and that's why I'm thanking you.

I hope you will think I'm sincere in what I say. I owe you a real debt and I think you ought to admire me for being brazen enough to acknowledge it. Lola Oliver told me that Fred Wingate was in town the other day and said you were working hard. Maybe some day when Lola's show closes, she and I will drive down to Red Bridge and take a look at all the ground hogs. If we come will you give us some cinnamon buns? And of course if you come to New York and don't call me up I'll be deeply offended.

Yours very sincerely,

MAISIE KEITH.

Peter had begun the letter without the slightest notion as to his correspondent and not until the mention of her apartment did he realize that it was Tommy Keith. But the character of his frown changed from curiosity to interest as he read, and Josie, whose sidelong glances were observing him closely, noticed that as he finished reading he was smiling. Then he turned the letter over and read it again. But he made no comment and putting the letter on the table, filled his pipe, lighted it thoughtfully and

smoked. Then after a while he yawned, got up and went to the door to see what the weather promised.

Josie, leaning slightly forward, glanced at the letter, suddenly staring intently as a word caught her eye. She looked at Peter's innocent back, half rose, staring at the name of Jack Salazar. Then planning quickly she put the newspaper over the letter and before Peter came in, resumed her darning.

He locked the door and knocked out his pipe on the hearth.

"I guess I'll be going up to bed," he said with a yawn.

Josie contemplated her work critically.

"How on earth do you ever get such holes in your socks, Mr. Randle? I'll stay down a while and finish," she said.

He bade her good night and went up the stairs. He had forgotten the letter. Josie did not remind him of it. But when she heard his door close upstairs her fingers relinquished Peter's stocking and eagerly groped across the table.

CHAPTER VI

THE SNOWBALL

1

THE wives of artists are, as a rule, intelligent and liberal creatures who have done some thinking, encountered many phases of life and succeeded in rising above the little prejudices of the strictly conventional. They have kindly dispositions and are tolerant of the foibles and failings of their fellow beings. Otherwise they could never be happy legally bound to the protean creatures whose names (and children) they bear.

The artist of this generation has fortunately discarded the long hair, the velvet jacket and tam-o'-shanter. He is, to all outward appearances, much like other men. His conduct with the female models that he employs is guided by the code of ethics that applies to the business man and his stenographer. The exceptions to this rule are as noteworthy in one case as in the other. But the artist is a person of desultory moods that would be the ruin of the business man. He is therefore less easy to live with but more delightful; in his working hours a creature of alternate ecstasies and despairs, in his hours of relaxation a clog in the domestic machinery, a dreamer of dreams that cannot possibly come true. Thus it is, by the nature of things that the wives of artists, to continue to be their wives must be persons of exceptional forbearance and understanding, fully expectant of tobacco ashes upon their best rugs and tolerant of the amiable weaknesses

that make their husbands the most exasperating and most adorable of men.

But there were limits to the magnanimity of the wives of Peter Randle's friends. He had, it seemed, challenged some definite conviction of theirs, a conviction that had nothing whatever to do with their otherwise generous interpretations of codes of morals or ethics. Peter had threatened the hearthstones of Red Bridge, providing an example of mild effrontery that could not be permitted to pass without notice. It was one thing to offer the hospitality of a night to a sick woman; another, to establish her in permanent residence, defying the rules of polite behavior and the opinion of all Red Bridge.

And the story that Mrs. Frear had brought from her washerwoman at the crossroads as to Josie Brant's reputation became more elaborate in its details as it was passed from lip to lip. She was not the sort of person to be tolerated in this quiet community, especially as a member of the household of a person so amiably regarded as Peter Randle.

If they had not liked Peter Randle, accepted him into their houses and given him the friendship that such a man obviously required of his neighbors, it would not have mattered what he did. But his very amiability and their liking had brought his transgression too close to their affections to be pleasant. He might have painted his body with vermillion and ocher, taken to his canoe and proclaimed himself King Tut-ankh-ah-men; or lighted a fire of his best canvases and danced around them in an orgy of self-abasement and they would have thought these things merely an original and rather amusing expression of a temperament too long suppressed. But Peter's con-

duct indicated no such idiosyncrasies as these. He had not even been original. He had done a stupid thing, the more unforgivable for being stupid. He had merely taken a disreputable woman to live in his house.

They had already for their incentive the reproof given Peter by Miss Charlotte McVitty. Miss McVitty had given Peter the cut direct as he got out of his "flivver" in front of the Red Lion garage on the main street at the end of the bridge. Peter, intent upon the business of filling his gasoline tank, had leaped from his machine, almost colliding with the lady who had stood facing him awaiting the opportune moment. When he had seen who it was he had swept off his hat and begun a polite greeting. But she had only stared at him disdainfully and turned her thin shoulders in the direction of her house. Peter had stared after her, hat in hand, at a loss, for the moment, as to the cause of this extraordinary behavior from a person who had shown him tokens of friendship, so much at a loss that he had smiled fatuously at her square diminishing shoulders for a moment; then frowned, putting his hat squarely upon his head and turned to the garage man. This encounter had taken place near the front porch of the hotel and was observed by a number of loungers upon the steps, among them, Harvey Wilson, the proprietor, who had laughed in a loud and exceedingly vulgar manner—a laugh born perhaps of an ancient grudge against Miss Charlotte, who had been a leader, before the war, of the local movement that had abolished liquor from the Red Lion and had made a dim and altogether forbidding place of its formerly cheerful bar, depriving Mr. Wilson of his chief source of income.

"Old girl don't seem any too crazy about you this

morning, Mr. Randle," said Wilson with pleasant irony.

Peter only glanced at him and turned to watch the arrow on the gauge of the gas tank. He was still a little amazed at the conduct of Miss McVitty, but aware, by this time, of its incentive. The loungers on the steps were indigenous to Red Bridge, all known to Peter as prodigious hunters of rabbits, squirrels and birds in season and in their less busy moments, workers at odd jobs at the oil works or on the farms.

"Seems like you must of done something Miss McVitty don't like," said another. And as Peter looked up, the man winked at him in a highly suggestive and significant manner.

Peter saw the wink but attached no particular importance to it until he had almost reached the bridge over the canal, when a thought shot through his mind like a sudden twinge of toothache. Josie! That wink from the lounge had been directed at him on account of Josie Brant. And its mischievous quality, meant to be more flattering than condemnatory, was suddenly appreciated in the full measure of its depravity. Peter was very angry for a moment, so angry that he almost ran over a hen out for an airing on the roadside with her brood. It even entered his mind to return to the Red Lion and inquire just what those comments meant. But, fortunately, the lane at this point being narrow he drove down the hill to the island and went at once to the studio where he could give the two encounters the thoughtful attention that they deserved.

He had placed himself, of course, in a position that was open to criticism. Wingate's prediction and Martha's comments had made him aware of that. He had

presented the situation to Josie with the delicacy demanded by his difficult position and hers and she had disarmed his excellent intentions by immediately bursting into tears. He had been very sorry for her before she had wept, but those tears had added greatly to the pathos of her aspect of mind and body, and hardened his mind to any contacts with the world which might still further disapprove of his guest and his hospitality. Therefore, he considered the conduct of Miss Charlotte McVitty as the unpardonable vagary of a prudish spinster whose friendship might be relinquished with little loss to his self-esteem. But the attitude of the loungers at the hotel and the insulting tolerance conveyed in that wink and comment were more difficult to condone. For the slaughterers of rabbits had said to Peter in the language which such men understand: "We know all about you and Josie Brant down on the island. She's a swell girl and we don't blame you for wanting her to stay there no matter what this old maid thinks about it all." Peter had been taken into partnership by these nefarious idlers and shown their admiration for having done what they would have liked to do but did not dare. But the thought of their opinions rankled, nevertheless, because it showed him how pitiless to a friendless woman Red Bridge could be.

He picked up his kit and went out upon the hills to paint. With indignation rose determination. As Wingate had remarked, Peter was stubborn when he got an idea stuck crosswise in his head. Josie's tears and pathos, the knowledge of his own innocence and hers, had conquered any subterfuge that may have occurred to him to save the situation. The idea of sending Josie away

from the island now in the face of the attitude that he had encountered would be nothing less than a confession of guilt and was not to be considered. So Peter returned to his opinion expressed to Josie in the full flush of his first definite decision. He didn't give a damn *what* they thought!

He set up his easel in a field before an arrangement of trees, hillside and river that had often attracted him and in a moment was deeply engrossed in his work.

But below him a woman got out of a car and climbed the hill by the lane from the road along the canal. She was tall and young and by her actions when she came abreast of Peter gave indication that she had observed him when he had set forth and that her immediate intention was to cross the field from the lane and to approach the spot where Peter was working. If Peter had turned his head in her direction he would have greeted her, because she was a friend of his, the wife of Joseph Garrett whose work, after Wingate's, was the most distinguished that was being done in the valley. The Garretts lived up the river near Horton's Ferry and had been frequent visitors to Peter's island to see his pictures and eat his cinnamon buns. They were pleasant and prosperous people, for Joe Garrett's tapestrylike designs, so different in method from Wingate's direct and literal interpretations of nature, were highly regarded in the exhibitions and eagerly purchased by collectors of American paintings. Peter liked the Garretts and was proud of their friendship, their confidence in his sincerity and their hope for his success. Jane Garrett was of the mothering sort. She had always looked upon Peter as one who needed her advice and friendship. But she was not a meddler and her

decision to speak to Peter about the story that was going the rounds was actuated by a desire to mend a situation that was already threatening Peter's good name and the stability of the friendships of those who cared for him. Under the circumstances it had been, of course, impossible for her to go to the island and so seeing him climb the hill she had chosen the favorable moment when she could see him alone.

At last Peter heard her footsteps behind him in the dry grass and turned.

There was a frown on his brow which relaxed at once when he identified the visitor.

She looked at his canvas, saying some pleasant things about it and Peter squinted over his nose at his subject.

"Sorry I can't offer you a chair, Jane," he said with a grin, "but here's a very nice tree stump."

He took from it his paint box but she waved the civility aside.

"I'm only going to be here a moment, Peter, and I wouldn't have interrupted you, if I hadn't had something important to say."

Peter stared at her, frowning again. Perhaps he suspected what was coming, for to cover the moment of doubt he put his palette upon the ground and brought out his pipe, filling it thoughtfully while she spoke.

"Of course, you know how fond Joe and I are of you, Peter. If I didn't know you knew it I wouldn't have thought for a moment of coming to speak to you. But Joe and I have talked it over and he thought that you would take it better coming from me. That's like a man, isn't it—always thrusting disagreeable responsibilities upon his wife!"

Peter was very certain now as to Jane Garrett's mission and was already prepared to shrink within his shell.

"You've come to me to talk about Miss Brant," he said.

Jane Garrett bit her lip, warned by Peter's attitude that her task was not going to be either pleasant or easy.

"Well, Peter," she said, coolly, "I *did* come here to speak to you about the woman in your house, because I can't bear to see a friend of mine made a fool of without trying to do something to prevent it."

And then without waiting for Peter's comments she repeated the story that Mrs. Frear had told her.

"It's quite clear to everybody," she continued, "if it isn't to you, that this girl is imposing on your good nature and that she isn't worthy of your kindness. You ought to know that I'm not the kind of a woman to try to make trouble. You ought to know, too, that it's costing me something to come to a friend and talk like this. But I thought it was my duty to tell you the truth about Josie Brant and just what people are saying about you both."

"That's very kind of you, Jane, but I—" He hesitated and turned away.

She glanced at him quickly but went on with greater difficulty:

"I want you to know that neither Joe nor I believe the things that people are saying about you. We insist, no matter what they say, in believing that you took this woman into your house out of the kindness of your heart, and that she has really outstayed her welcome."

She paused and Peter took the pipe out of his mouth, blinking rapidly.

"I'm—ah—sorry you thought it necessary to speak about this. Very sorry."

Jane Garrett found herself growing angry at his attitude but managed to control her feelings as she went on rapidly:

"You've got to see, Peter, whether you want to or not that if you insist on keeping this woman in your house you're laying yourself open to the vilest imputations. I don't believe what people are saying about you but you'll admit that you're placing your friends in the position of being perfectly helpless to defend you."

"Oh! Do you think so? I—I'm sorry about that, too."

"You mean," she gasped, "that you don't care?"

"No. I didn't say that," he went on, doggedly. "But I—I've already thought this out for myself. And it is, you'll admit, rather personal. I don't care what people say about me, what rotten things they say. But I do resent the lies they're inventing to take away the good name of a girl, just because she happens to be poor and unfortunate."

"You mean," Jane gasped, "that you've decided to become the champion of this girl in the face of what everybody knows about her?"

"I'm not sure that they know anything about her. I've talked to her. I don't think these people are fair. I'm sorry you believed them."

Jane Garrett shrugged her shoulders and turned away. What was to be done with such a man? She had believed that Peter was actuated only by motives of kindness, but in her anger at his attitude toward her friendliness she permitted herself to think for the moment that she was

ready to believe anything of him. She stared at him for a moment and then slowly turned and walked down the hill to her machine. She was humiliated, depressed at the failure of her mission which now seemed to have been such a terrible mistake. She had counted, she realized, too much upon the outward symbols of friendship without considering the elements of Peter's character that dominated his decision. To salve her self-esteem she tried to believe that there was more than disinterested charity behind his utter repudiation of her suggestions. And yet in spite of her wish, she could not believe that Peter was the sort of a man to carry on a disreputable affair under the very noses of the people of Red Bridge, or anywhere else. It was more satisfactory to think of him as a fool, a visionary, a dupe of a woman's tears. But who else—unless perhaps Frederick Wingate—would believe that? . . . She would go and have a talk with Fred. He was Peter's friend. If he would, he might do something.

She set her machine in motion and with a lingering and rather pitiful glance up the hill at Peter slowly drove away. Peter still stood in the attitude in which she had left him, facing up the hill away from his canvas, his arms folded, head bent in deep and somber thought. The whole thing was so fatuous. Jane Garrett could have wept.

Peter stood motionless for a long while, revolving the phrases that had just passed, over and over in his mind. Then picked up his palette and brushes and tried to resume his interrupted work. But nothing went well. A cloud obscured the sky. The light had changed. And after glowering at his canvas for a while he packed up his kit and went home.

2

Wingate listened to Jane Garrett as she described her interview with Peter. He did not commend her for her visit, and remarked with his usual frankness that she had gone out of her way to pour oil on a fire that was already blazing rather brightly. "I've been waiting for some weeks for Peter to discuss this thing with me. But when I found he didn't want to talk about it, I made up my mind not to interfere. I'm not going to say anything about Josie Brant. I've heard those stories they're telling about her. I guess they're true. But you couldn't make Peter believe 'em. There's room in Peter's mind for only one idea at a time. The one he's got there now is that the Brant girl has thrown herself upon his protection and charity. There's more to it that you don't know and I can't tell you. But he's made up his mind that it's his job to look after her and you couldn't get that idea out of his head with an ax. That's why I say your visit was a mistake—"

"Oh, I know it now," said Jane. "But I thought that by presenting the case through other people's eyes I could make him see—"

"No. His vision is inward. He can't see beyond his nose. And if he thinks he's in the right he'd sacrifice everything he owned to carry out his conviction."

"But surely, you could talk to him and make him see—"

"I've done that already and been snubbed for my pains. No, thank you. I'd do almost anything in the world for Peter except try to convince him that he was wrong."

Wingate turned toward his visitor abruptly.

"And mind you, I'm not sure that he *is* wrong. You've got to judge a man by his point of view and what his motive is. He believes that girl needs his help. He doesn't care anything for her. He couldn't. She's not the kind a man of Peter's sort *could* care for. But if you think of it for a moment you'll see that his attitude represents something bigger than anything anybody in Red Bridge can comprehend. He only sees the big facts—a helpless woman in trouble and need, his own ability to help her. They're the natural complements in a situation. The other things that people are talking about mean nothing to Peter. He knows he's clean and he thinks she is. And the talk is only going to make him more determined to do his duty as he sees it."

"But, Fred," she protested, "I tell you it's all wrong. Where does it end? This woman is unscrupulous. She must be. And Peter—a child."

Wingate rubbed his chin and grinned. "I think Peter can look out for himself."

"Oh, I've no patience with you. You don't want to be bothered, that's all."

"Perhaps not. But there's another thing. When Peter loses all his other friends I want him to have one man left that he can turn to."

"It may be too late then," said Jane.

"We'll have to take that chance."

3

It had not been a pleasant day for Peter, but that night he was more kind than ever to Josie Brant. He thought it was very nice of her to be mending his socks and under-

wear and told her so. Of course he disliked to speak of the visit of Mrs. Garrett because he thought that that would make Josie unhappy—and that she would probably cry again and *that* would make *him* unhappy. But he felt that it was necessary to speak of it. He had reached a point in his allegiance to her where the stories that people were telling of her past made little impression upon him. Even if he had believed them to be true it is extremely doubtful whether he would have thought differently about her dependence upon him. She was, like the lame fox terrier that he had taken in and cured, a small creature whom the world had misused and who needed the encouragement of his sympathy and friendship.

He had found that she did not unnecessarily discommoded him. Of course he did not understand women and there were times when she acted in a perfectly incomprehensible manner—when she cried, for instance, or when she relapsed into long and moody silences when he talked of painting or of literature, subjects, he was quite sure, in which she was uninstructed. And then in other moods she was most obliging and even deferential, waiting on him against his protest, even cleaning and filling his pipe or replenishing the wood box when he had forgotten to do so. Upon the whole he did not mind having her there any more than he minded having Martha. The sharp corners of their acquaintance were well rounded now and he did not find it necessary to show her the formality of the drawing room. He went to sleep in his chair when he chose and he talked to her when he liked. And if she talked too much, as she sometimes did, of things that did not particularly interest him, such as the motion

pictures, the theater and Broadway, he could always go up into the studio and close the door. By mutual consent, it seemed, they avoided all conversation that verged upon the personal, for Peter had learned to dread the menace of her tears or sentiment; and Josie feared perhaps a renewal of the suggestion that she should be sent away.

To-night, however, Peter determined to risk the hazards of the woman's sentimentality by discussing with her the story that Jane Garrett had brought to him. He owed Josie the frankness, and he had every reason to believe that she would confirm his opinions as to her innocence. Her mood had been quiet. She had replied to his comments upon the newspaper in monosyllables, but she sewed, apparently contented, upon her side of the table. He filled his pipe again and turned to her.

"I've—ah—just found out something about those stories, Josie," he began.

"What stories?" she asked, her eyes wide with innocence.

"Oh, that stuff people are talking about you," he said with a fine air of indifference.

She dropped her work and straightened, her eyes suddenly catching fire. "Who's been talking now?"

Peter waved a deprecatory pipestem. "It doesn't matter who. But you've got enemies around here. That's certain. Did you ever know a Mrs. Beamish—an English woman—lives up at Milestown?"

Josie's eyes glanced sideways at the door jamb, then blinking slightly were raised to his.

"Beamish?" she asked, "Beamish. No, I never heard of her."

"I thought not. Well, she takes in washing from some of the people around here. She says she used to know you."

"She must be mistaken," said Josie, clearly.

"She used to know you," he said, "when you visited your aunt, Mrs. Cathcart." He puffed on his pipe a few times to keep it alight, as though his own fire was somehow dependent on it. "I've got to speak plainly. You ought to know. She says you—you didn't have a good reputation—"

"Oh! How awful! What a terrible thing for anybody to say—especially as I never knew them," said Josie.

"Funny, wasn't it; she said your aunt was a nice woman but that you pretty nearly drove her crazy. That you finally ran off to New York with a young fellow from Milestown—Jordan, I think the name was—"

Instead of the continued sobriety that he had expected from her at this accusation, Josie suddenly broke into a kind of nervous giggling.

"That *is* funny," she said, "a fellow from Milestown! Why, I never knew any fellow named Jordan in my life."

She stopped giggling at the fender and suddenly turned her eyes full upon him. The charge was doubtless so preposterous, so humiliating that she found difficulty in keeping her composure and bent her head again upon her needlework.

"I thought they were lying," said Peter through the teeth on his pipestem. "You never knew this fellow Jordan, did you?"

"Oh, never—"

"And Mrs. Beamish?"

"It's a funny name. I ought to have remembered it, oughtn't I?"

"Of course," said Peter, grinning. "I don't believe what they said. But I thought I ought to tell you. I owed you that, Josie."

"I'm glad you did, Mr. Randle. And, of course, as you didn't believe— It don't matter." She turned with a puzzled air away from him. "But it's terrible how people can make up such things about people."

"Well," said Peter, rising, "we won't say anything more about it."

"My goodness!" Josie said in conclusion. "I'm glad I haven't got a mind that thinks up things like that."

"So am I, Josie," Peter replied, feelingly. He stretched his arms, yawned, and said he thought he would go to the studio and "potter" around, but Josie, who had recovered her equanimity with happy indifference, now asked him to stay and talk to her. The request was unusual, so unusual that he sank into his chair again rather curious as to her motive.

"We said we weren't going to talk about Jack Salazar, Mr. Randle," she began very quietly, "but something has been bothering me for a long while."

Peter frowned. "I don't see how it can do you any good to talk about him," he muttered.

"No, I guess it won't. But I've been curious about what happened when you went to New York and—"

"What's the use?" said Peter. "I thought you'd decided to forget him."

"Yes," she said with great deliberation, "I did. But then it isn't as easy as you think. Especially—" and she

shot a swift glance at him—"when I know there was another woman who took my place."

"Oh, who told you that?" he asked, uneasily.

"Er—I knew it all the time. A fellow I met at the theater told me about the swell dame at the Ritz he was going with—" she said slowly. "Maisie Keith was her name." And then as she furtively watched the frown deepen on Peter's face: "Did you ever meet her, Mr. Randle?"

"Yes I—I did. But I don't think there's any need for you to bother about her—not now anyhow."

"She's rich, of course. But is she pretty, Mr. Randle?"

"I don't see why you want to know," he muttered. "Yes. I suppose you'd call her pretty."

"Do you know her very well?"

"No—ah—not very," he replied, stumbling into the net. "I—I managed to do her a service once and she was grateful."

"Oh, I see. A service. You mean you got her out of some sort of trouble. She's that sort, isn't she?"

"Yes, you might say so. She's that sort. But why—?" he protested.

"I ought to know about her," said Josie. "It's part of my punishment to know," she added.

"Well, if it's any comfort to you, you needn't consider her at all. She has no use for Salazar. She's given him up. Good riddance I say."

Josie now had every aspect of the injured and forsaken.

"And was it you that helped her to give him up?" she asked.

Peter straightened in his chair, startled at the ques-

tion. What was it that gave women this faculty—this extraordinary faculty for divination? He did not reply.

"You don't answer me. It must be true. You *did* help her to give him up, didn't you?"

"Why, Josie, I—"

"You told her about me, didn't you?" she insisted, quietly, "about Jack and me."

"Oh, I say. What put that in your head?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

Peter knew that he had, perhaps unjustifiably, used Josie's name in helping Tommy Keith. He was very uncomfortable and wished himself out of the room, alone in the studio. He rose and knocked out his pipe against the fender. But he made no reply.

"Won't you answer me?" she asked, appealingly. He glanced at her and saw that there was a suggestion of moisture about her eyes. Tears again!

"I—er—I thought I was justified in doing what I did—er—under the circumstances."

"Oh!" she gasped, shortly. "Oh, Mr. Randle!"

He stole another glance at her. She had bent her head forward and a falling tear glimmered in the lamplight. The woman was crying again.

"You—you told this—this Maisie Keith all about me—about my—my trouble! Oh, how could you?"

The tears were falling faster now and the unpleasant sounds of sobbing, though gentle at first, had begun. Peter grew desperate.

"I—I had to," he muttered. "It was the only thing to do."

"To—to tell my secret—to a—a stranger?" she sobbed. "Oh, Mr. Randle!"

Peter straightened and turned toward her—his hands deep in his pockets and very unhappy.

"She needed help," he proclaimed. "She thought he was square—just the way you did. It was the only way to—to make her see the truth. It was the only way to put this man Salazar in his place—to keep another woman from suffering what you had suffered."

Josie groped around for a handkerchief and not finding one wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her dress. She sought his face with an injured glance.

"And you—you didn't mind using me—just as if I—I'd been no account—as if I'd deserved all my trouble."

"No, no. Of course not. I didn't see how it could matter to you. She—she didn't even know you."

"I didn't think you could do a thing like that to me. I didn't," she went on in broken accents, "because you—you've been so kind, so considerate. You must have been—been crazy about her to forget what you owed to me."

Crazy?—about Tommy Keith? What was the woman saying? He stared at her bent head in amazement. Her thin shoulders were heaving disturbingly. Perhaps she didn't know what she was saying. It seemed like that. She was distraught with her wounded pride. And he had been, through his indelicacy, the cause of this new disaster. He took refuge in a gruff voice at her astonishing phrase.

"I wasn't crazy about her. I'm not crazy about any woman. She—she just needed my help and I—I gave it to her. I thought I—I had the right to use any information I had. I guess I hadn't. If you think I've done you a wrong, I'm sorry. That's all I can say."

Josie was silent for a long moment, her head bent, still quivering nervously. Peter paced the floor, glancing at

her unhappily from time to time. At last she stirred and slowly rose.

"I—I guess I'll go up to my room," she said.

It was an effective exit, submissive in the main with a suggestion of reproach as well as melancholy. Peter could say nothing. He was dumb with amazement and slightly bewildered as to how the whole thing had come about. He was angry too, but whether at Josie or at himself, he could not for the moment determine. It made him most uncomfortable for this woman to be slopping tears all over the house but he couldn't deny that he had been in a sense responsible. He hadn't really had any right to tell Josie's story to Tommy or even to Wingate. But things seemed somehow to be different now than they had been in the beginning. The pity of her situation, the rotten talk that was going around, had given her greater claims upon him. And she seemed to cling to him with greater need, a need itself grown more significant through the evil report that had brought their relations into question so unpleasantly.

4

But Peter Randle's difficulties at home and abroad were not yet ended. For Mrs. Johanna Shank, the militant leader of the women in Red Bridge, had gone quite violently upon the warpath in defense of its good name. She had a growing daughter whose sensibilities, she thought, had already been greatly shocked by the conduct of Peter Randle and his visitor. She had therefore summoned into conclave at her dry-goods store a number of estimable ladies, with a high appreciation of the opportunities of the occasion—ladies whose sensibilities had also been vio-

lated. The affair had been discussed with a fervor known only to those among whom social improprieties in others are oblique praise of themselves. Witnesses, among them the washerwoman at the crossroads, had been informally summoned and with Johanna upon the bench, so to speak, and the jury of ladies listening with indignation, Peter Randle had been tried and by unanimous vote of those present convicted of the unpardonable sin of harboring in his house a woman of no reputation. No sentence had, of course, been imposed, the jurisdiction being of doubtful authority, but it was decided that Peter Randle should at once be induced to send the woman away from Red Bridge, or indeed be sent away himself. That decision reached, it only remained to provide the proper missionary to visit Peter's island and deliver to him the sense of this exciting meeting. Johanna Shank, being the foremost in her denunciations, had, of course, been selected for his duty. But, with a proper sense of her position as a mother to a grown and slightly inquisitive daughter, she had refused to go near the house. Peter Randle's island, was not, she insisted, the place for a decent woman, the mother of a family. This was a job for a man, one with an important position in the community, whose word would carry weight and bring shame to the cheek of the scarlet woman. They therefore decided, much to his misfortune, upon the new clergyman of the church in the village, the Reverend Clarence Snyder, who had yet to win his laurels in the community and was therefore to be provided with this fitting opportunity.

Clarence Snyder was a pinkish mild-mannered man, with silky blond hair, and gold spectacles. His eyes were light blue and his rectitude beyond criticism. When the propo-

sition was advanced to him, he was not greatly impressed by the opportunities that it presented. This was a very deplorable case, he admitted, and within his province, but suggested that it would be better if some intimate friend of Peter Randle's, like Mr. Wingate, should be asked to see the culprit and speak to him in the friendly way that their intimacy would warrant. Mrs. Shank informed him that Mr. Wingate refused absolutely to meddle in what he did not consider to be his affair. Mrs. Shank added that the ladies of the congregation had talked the matter over informally and had decided that he and no other was the person to make the visit, thus doing his duty in accordance with the injunctions of his own recent sermon upon the influence of the purity of nature upon the rural community.

As may be deduced from his first evasion, the Reverend Snyder was not very happy in the mission exacted of him, but these ladies were, as he knew, important and influential members of his congregation. It was very necessary for a clergyman coming to a strange community to ingratiate himself as much as possible with his flock and so when he saw that there was no way to evade the issue, he reluctantly consented to become the mouthpiece of the ladies of Red Bridge and the servant of the enemies of vice in this pleasant and otherwise well conducted rural community.

It was, of course, quite proper that as a minister of the Gospel, he should call upon his parishioners. His method of approach was, therefore, rather clearly indicated. This Peter Randle, he had been informed, was a good-natured man, a trifle eccentric to be sure, but a fellow to whom he might talk as one gentleman to another. Randle had not, so far as Clarence Snyder could learn, ever been inside the

little church of which he was the rector. But he bore the name of being a good fellow and, perhaps for this reason, had fallen too easily a prey to the woman within his gates. As to Miss Brant, he hoped that she would not be present at the meeting, for the women had given him such a definite idea of her obliquity that he was sure he must speak to her with the severity that the occasion demanded.

The clergyman chose a rainy day when he could be sure of finding Peter Randle at home. And clad in raincoat and galoshes and carrying an umbrella, he walked the half-mile or more from the village to the wooden bridge over the canal which had been indicated to him, following the path down the hill to the private bridge. The dogs were vociferous, one or two of them even disposed to altercation and defiance, but he went bravely on toward the house, where in a moment, Peter Randle, aroused by the commotion, came forth from the studio door to greet the visitor. He was in his shirt sleeves, his old clothing was liberally smeared with paint, and he came down the steps nodding his head politely, while his glance went over the somber black of his visitor in inquiry and appraisal.

"How do you do," said Peter.

The clergyman extended his hand. "I'm Clarence Snyder, the new rector at Red Bridge, and I thought I'd stop in to make your acquaintance."

"That's very kind of you," said Peter, dubiously. "I—ah—won't you come in?"

"Thanks." The rector shook his wet umbrella, scraped his galoshes on the edge of the step and went into the studio. He had never been in an artist's studio before and peered around timidly into the corners as though expecting to discover something overtly indecorous. He had

expected, he thought, dim lights, luxury, divans and Turkish rugs and was surprised at the austerity of the place—its bare floor, stacks of dusty canvases, an easel and a few comfortable chairs. But a cheerful fire was burning on the hearth and Peter took his visitor's wraps and hung them over a chairback to dry.

"I see you're smoking a pipe," ventured the rector. "May I—?"

"Of course," said Peter, cheerfully. "There's the 'baccy.' I can give you a drink of Scotch too, to keep out the damp. No? Have you matches? Do sit down."

Mr. Snyder complied, aware of the fellowship of the tobacco and his host's amiability, which seemed to have put them at once upon satisfactory terms. Randle was not as he had pictured him—an easy-going fellow touched with the scars of dissipation. This man, he saw, was pleasant enough, and he had an air of sobriety and dignity that were a little out of keeping with the situation in which he had placed himself. Peter's eyes examined him with intense curiosity as he began speaking.

"I haven't been at Red Bridge long enough to go around and call on everybody," said Snyder, tactfully, "but I thought I'd like to stop in here to say how d'ye do and make myself known to you."

"That's kind of you," said Peter. "I don't suppose I'd ever have met you if you hadn't. We painters live a good deal to ourselves and I haven't been inside of a church for years."

"Well, it's not too late to begin, Mr. Randle. Of course, I'd like to see you there."

"I'm afraid I'm hopeless, Mr. Snyder."

"No, I won't believe that. You see, some people are

born to the church, some achieve the church, and some have the church thrust upon them," he said with a pleasant laugh. "I guess you come in the latter category."

"It's no good trying to do anything with me," said Peter, calmly. "I've had the church thrust on me before, but I've passed it by."

"I can't understand why—"

"Well, I want to do my worshiping all by myself—not with a crowd."

"But, you forget that when two or three are gathered together, the Lord will grant their requests."

"I've got my religion," said Peter. "It suits me. Are you sure you won't have a drink, Mr. Snyder?"

This hint at a desire to change the subject was obvious. Randle's attitude was what might have been expected, but Mr. Snyder, having paved the way for what was to follow, felt again very ill at ease. In spite of Randle's politeness, he had an air of obduracy which made things difficult. So the rector plunged like a brave swimmer into the flood after a drowning man.

"I suppose you'll think, not being a member of the church I represent, that I'm going a little out of my way coming down here to speak about religion to you. But a minister is always a missionary, and even if I can't interest you in the work I'm doing in Red Bridge I thought I might at least gain enough of your friendship to be able to talk to you about a matter that has been bothering me a great deal."

"What matter is that, Mr. Snyder?" asked Peter, abruptly, now suddenly alert to the object of the visit.

Mr. Snyder's pinkish face grew more pink, but he stuck to his guns manfully.

"A matter that has been causing your friends in Red Bridge a great deal of concern. I have only been here a short time but I have already learned how easily prejudices are engendered in such a small town, how dependent each person is upon the conduct of the others and how the—ah—lapses of any one member of the community may very closely affect the lives of all."

Peter rose and stood at the fireplace, frowning somberly.

"Please come to the point, Mr. Snyder," he said.

"I will, then," said the minister, firmly. "I refer to your manner of living here with a woman—"

"Wait a moment," put in Peter so sharply that the visitor paused. "What do *you* know of my manner of living, Mr. Snyder?"

The question was pertinent—also embarrassing.

"Well I—I only know what I've been told."

"And you believed everything that you were told without taking the trouble to investigate?" asked Peter scornfully.

But the rector for all his mild hair and eyes was not lacking in courage.

"You can see, can't you, Mr. Randle, that appearances are against you?"

"Appearances!" cried Peter, striding up and down. "But what do you *know*. That's the point. Do you think that you, as a minister of the Gospel, have the right to draw your conclusions from the common gossip of a small town and attack the good name of the unfortunate woman who happens to be living in my house? Do you? I don't. And if that's the sort of religion you've come to Red Bridge to teach I don't want any of it."

There was a ring of righteous anger in Randle's voice, a black flame in his eyes. He looked less like a man charged with guilt than a fanatic alight in some holy cause. The clergyman bit his lip. It seemed that he, and not Randle, was on trial.

"You'll admit, Mr. Randle," he said, quietly, "that the presence of such a woman in a bachelor's house is most—ah—unconventional."

Peter stopped before him rigidly and Mr. Snyder rose.

"I'd remind you that the woman you're speaking of is under my protection," said Peter between his teeth. "If people have lied to you about her, that's your lookout. But you can't speak slightly of her here. Do you understand?"

Clarence Snyder was silent. What else could be said after that? Randle's tone, his attitude were a threat. The rector did not fear bodily injury. But there was a greater courage needed here than he possessed—the courage of his convictions. Whatever the truth about the career of this woman Josie Brant, and the evidence against her had surely been convincing, this man, Peter Randle, had made a stout denial, at least for himself. Liberal his views might be and unconventional but he bore none of the signs that might be expected in a social renegade or libertine. The clergyman had made this visit against his own better judgment. He had a sense of having been put in the wrong because, whatever their basis, Randle's convictions were stronger than his. Randle's logic, if unconventional, was perfect. And he spoke like a righteous man defending his righteousness. Clarence Snyder was troubled. There was but one thing to do. He picked up his raincoat and umbrella.

"I shall say nothing more, Mr. Randle," he muttered.

Peter stood staring at the floor, the fire of his wrath of a moment ago quenched by his visitor's sudden humility. He raised his head as the rector turned toward the door.

"Answer me this, Mr. Snyder," he said, more quietly. "Those women sent you, didn't they? They've listened to lies and made them themselves, just because I do a thing my way and not theirs. Well, you can go back and tell them that they can't drive Josie Brant out of my house—or make me change my habits or my opinions to suit them. They can think what they please, do what they please. Miss Brant remains in my house and under my protection. I hope that's clear."

The rector turned again toward the door. "I'm sorry, Mr. Randle," he said.

"So am I, Mr. Snyder." And then, as though something was required of him as host, Peter offered Clarence Snyder his hand. "I've been impolite to you, I'm afraid," he said, more gently. "If you'd come on any other mission—"

"Good-by, Mr. Randle— Good-by."

Peter watched the clergyman as he climbed to the tow-path, a black note like an ink-spot on a gray blotter. And did not go indoors until long after his visitor had disappeared. Then he sat in a chair by the fire and for a while stared with a puzzled look into the embers. They were pushing him pretty hard. . . .

CHAPTER VII

PETER RECEIVES A VISITOR

1

IN reply to her letter to Peter Randle, Tommy Keith had received a polite note expressing pleasure at hearing from her, and satisfaction that his awkward visit to her apartment had produced such excellent results. He had never thought her a fool, he said—just the victim of the pretensions of a fellow who wasn't worthy of her. He expressed pleasure at the thought of her visit with Lola Oliver to Red Bridge, but warned her that he lived in a primitive fashion, and with the exception of Martha's cinnamon buns, which were all that could be desired, his table was not to be favorably compared with the luxuries of the Ritz. The letter was couched in dignified terms which seemed somehow characteristic and gave Tommy Keith a great deal of amusement, especially the concluding phrases, that told her, as politely as possible, that her proffered visit (which he had taken literally) was not greatly desired.

Tommy felt a warm gratitude for the part that Peter had played in her sentimental education and she was really curious as to this woman Josie Brant, the horrible example that Peter had produced, like a conjurer taking a rabbit out of a hat, to bring Tommy to her senses and save her from the consequences of her folly. It had become more and more clear to Tommy that Peter had

saved her, and she pictured again and again the scene with Jack Salazar which Peter had completely dominated. It was unusual for any one to dominate Tommy and she had not at first been sure that she quite liked the sensation. But time had given Peter's character firmer contours. She liked him a great deal, in spite of his peculiarities.

She heard from Lola through Frederick Wingate that the woman was still in Peter's house in spite of all the efforts of the ladies of Red Bridge to dislodge her. That would be like Peter, too, to stick the more obstinately to his determination in spite of, or because of, the criticisms of the village. Fred Wingate's view of the affair, in pleasant corroboration of her own, was that Peter Randle, according to his custom, was doing the wrong thing rather magnificently. That would be like him—the wrong thing with a dogged obstinacy to prove it right.

Tommy's curiosity about Peter's relations with the woman in his house had grown with the crumbs of information that Lola had passed on from Wingate; that Peter was quite unconscious of her as a woman with a sensual appeal; that Josie was, for a reason of her own, playing her cards to remain in Peter's house under the protection of his friendship. But whatever their relation, there she was, a part of Peter's life, a part of his responsibilities. It seemed to Tommy, as she reconsidered his letter, that it indicated with a great deal of definiteness, a doubt as to the pleasure he might derive from a meeting between Tommy and Josie Brant.

But other matters took up her thoughts, and having slipped Peter's letter into a pigeonhole of her desk she promptly forgot him. Her letter to him had been the re-

sult of an impulse to fulfill a sort of obligation to a person who had been of service to her. His reply, after all, if she chose to see it in that light, marked the close of the incident.

It was not until Frederick Wingate's next visit to New York that Peter Randle was brought again to her mind. She had dropped in on Lola one afternoon in default of something more exciting to do. Wingate was there, sitting in the window, sniffing at the desultory breezes that came in from river and sea. He and Lola had, it seemed, reached some conversational backwater, and her visit was opportune. She learned that they had been discussing Peter Randle and the woman in his house.

When Tommy questioned, Wingate told her of the stories that were floating around the village about Josie, the activities of Johanna Shank and the visit of the parson whom Peter had repelled with small arm fire without leaving his trench. It was Wingate's idea that Peter had been driven to his attitude of defiance by the meddling of his neighbors, and that nothing short of dynamite would blast him from his position.

"Or another woman," came laconically from Lola on the couch.

"Another woman? Don't you think that one is enough?"

"But *three* is a crowd, you see—"

"I may be dense, but—"

"I mean that this is a woman's job. Your kind-hearted friend is perfectly helpless in the hands of this slick little ticket seller. He'd probably like to throw her into the river as he'd do if she were Jack Salazar. But she only has to cry a little once in a while to get her meal ticket."

Lola rose suddenly. "You don't think she's 'vamped' him, do you, Fred?"

"No, I don't. If she did I don't think he'd know what she was about," Wingate said with a laugh.

"Well, I don't see how Peter Randle is worth all this bothering about," she went on, slowly. "But you seem to be so interested, Fred—"

"I hate to see a good man made ridiculous."

"Oh, very well, I guess it's about time some experts were put on the job in the affair—"

"Experts!"

She nodded. "Me and Tommy—mostly Tommy."

Tommy Keith had listened to the conversation with much interest, but the use of her name in this connection was quite without warrant.

"Me!" she exclaimed.

"Didn't you talk about taking a run down to Red Bridge some day for lunch? It's only sixty miles or so. It wouldn't take more than a few minutes in that new runabout of yours. We close at the theater next week for the season. Fred will have us to lunch, won't you, Fred?"

"Of course—and as long as you like. But I can't see—"

"You're not expected to see. You're just hired to rustle the sets and tend the switchboard. Tommy will take center stage with me upper right doing the philosophic aunt. Wise stuff. Get me?"

"No, I don't," said Tommy with an air of reservations. "If you think I'm going to go down to Red Bridge just to meddle in Peter Randle's affairs—"

"Who said anything about meddling? You're just go-

ing down with me to see Fred's winter work. I guess there's no law against that, is there? Then we'll run over to Peter Randle's and have a look at his flock of dogs. Just to make things interesting you might take those Pekingese insects of yours to visit Peter Randle's menagerie. They'd all probably enjoy it very much."

Tommy was laughing now.

"But I don't see what *I* can do. If the meddling of his friends has already—"

"We take a different line, dearie," Lola interrupted. "Just pure interest in his work and unadulterated friendship. If he happens to talk about Josie Brant, it's not your fault, is it?"

"No. But—"

"Didn't you say you wanted to go down there? Aren't you curious to see what sort of a creature can turn this peaceful little burg of Fred's into an imitation of a chorus ladies' dressing room on a stormy night? To say nothing of what she did—"

"Oh, shut up, Lole!" remarked Tommy, slightly flushed.

"Oh, very well, I will. But then I just wanted to remind you that maybe you owe Peter Randle—"

"Oh, I'll go, of course," said Tommy with a glance at Wingate. "This is your doing, Fred. But it can't do any harm and I do like Peter Randle."

"All right. That's settled. You can leave the details to me."

2

Tommy Keith's red car did not accomplish the distance to the Delaware River in the short time that Lola had mentioned with such optimism. It was a run of three

hours and more even for Tommy, but the day was fine and their early start from the ferry brought them to the river before twelve o'clock. They crossed the covered wooden bridge from Smithville, went over the canal and drove up the hill the short distance to the Red Lion Hotel.

"So this is London," said Lola.

Tommy's red car and the two stylish ladies within it created something more than a mild sensation as they drove up to the steps of the hotel where Harvey Wilson and his satellites sat smoking or expectorating at their favorite targets. Tommy had been instructed by Frederick Wingate to ask at the Red Lion the way to his house and in response to her inquiry at least three men got up and with extreme solicitude and exactitude directed them to their destination. For Tommy, obeying Lola's injunctions, had put on her most becoming costume and hat, with her sable neckpiece and looked altogether very fetching and expensive. And far from looking the philosophic aunt, Lola, with her dark hair and eyes, small velvet hat and well cut sport coat, made an excellent foil for Tommy's blonde prettiness.

They turned into the street above the canal, followed by admiring glances and taking the dirt road to their destination turned up the hill to Wingate's place, a modest clapboard house that deceived them until from the side they saw the huge studio that had been added to the north. He was, of course, delighted and showed his hospitality in a whole-souled sort of greeting, presenting his daughter Mary, a comely girl with her father's eyes and a manner of very pleasant simplicity. The dwelling which had promised so little from outside was really a treasure house of interesting and valuable collections, old furniture,

Sheraton and Heppelwhite pieces all in an excellent state, early American china, rare rugs, and paintings upon the walls, exchanges for Wingate's from celebrated painters of Europe and America. Lola, who had browsed successfully at the auctions and Fourth Avenue antique shops, went into immediate ecstasies and was restored to sanity only when Fred Wingate brought her a cocktail and Mary announced lunch.

To Tommy, accustomed to her French maid and other menials innumerable to answer her calls, the simplicity of the ménage was very charming, for, though there seemed to be somebody in the kitchen, Mary Wingate waited upon them, then sat beside them, and ate, talking with an intelligence that showed reading and travel. The chicken was broiled to a turn and their appetites, after the long brisk drive, enormous. In the studio where they sat for their coffee and smoked, Wingate showed them the work that he had been doing during the winter. Tommy stared, aware of the dignity of the moment. Painting had never meant anything to her, for there had always been many things in her life that seemed so much more necessary to enjoy. And Fred Wingate, who had been just one of Lola's picturesque friends, achieved at a bound the splendor of a personality. Not being a frequenter of exhibitions which she had classified among the necessary educational institutions dedicated to the highbrows, Tommy to her surprise experienced a sudden revelation and was aware of an intense pleasure in these remarkable interpretations of winter, which made the largest part of his showing; the shimmering cold blue of the river with gray-green streaks of ice along the banks; black pools beneath the sedges; wood-interiors with beeches, oaks and maples in a tangle of

last year's vines; clumps of dark green laurel half covered with snow; some of them all gray and mysterious with the mist; others luscious with the bright color of late afternoon. Pale hillsides with feathery trees in delicate tints against pale green skies. All of winter was in these pictures of Wingate's, the epic of its cold, the idyl of its loneliness, the lyric of its brightness. All of these things Tommy felt and wondered why it was that she had never permitted herself this particular sort of a thrill before. Wingate's life had a new significance for her and she understood the meaning of his ruggedness that had seemed so unattractive when compared with the graceful sophistries of other men that she knew. She understood better, too, what Peter Randle had said about the daubs in Jimmy Blake's studio: "Rubbish—fake individualism—a pose, and rather a filthy one." It was curious that she should remember the phrases, but they seemed to fit Jimmy's paintings so exactly in the face of the honest art that Fred Wingate was showing her. She wanted to buy one at once, for Tommy always wanted to buy and usually did buy anything that pleased her.

"I want that one—or that!" she cried, exactly as though she were buying stockings. "How much are they, Fred? I'll send you a check as soon as I get back to New York."

Wingate gave her his slow smile. He was very much pleased, but explained to her that most of these pictures had already been planned for—a private collection here, an exhibition or a gallery there. But he promised her one later—one that he would paint for her especially. Tommy was disappointed and showed her humor so plainly that Lola laughed at her.

"Who are you, Tommy," she asked, "to be setting up in competition with the Luxemburg and Metropolitan Museum? Don't you know that this isn't a department store?"

In a way, it was all an education for Tommy, or the beginnings of one.

3

It was planned that Tommy should go to Peter's island alone and having thus far committed herself to the adventure she drove off down the hill, leaving Lola to make better her acquaintance with Mary Wingate and go over in detail the history of Wingate's collections.

The road after she left the canal was steep and rocky, requiring careful driving and she was over the private bridge and on the island in the midst of Peter's yelping pack before she was aware that she had arrived at her destination. She drove into the open space near the sheds and looked about her. There was no living thing in sight except the dogs. She looked them over to find that most of their tails were signaling cheerfully and so she got out of the machine and walked around to the front of the house, followed closely by the pack who were sniffing at her skirts, seduced by the mingled odors of sachet and Pekingese. As she came to the door a figure reached it from within.

"I came to see Mr. Randle," said Tommy, pleasantly. "Is he in?"

"No. He's out painting."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Won't you—er—come in?"

At the first moment of contact these two women had re-

ceived the impetus of definite antagonism. And while scarcely looking at each other, each had received a completed image, to the smallest detail of lineament, of expression and costume of the other. What Tommy chose to see most distinctly, as she expressed it afterward to Lola, was "just a common little thing with high cheek bones, narrow eyes and stubby fingers." What Josie saw after the saucy inquiry in Tommy's eyes, was her forty dollar hat, her four hundred dollar sable neckpiece, her three hundred dollar suit and her twenty-five dollar shoes.

The tone in which Josie proffered the invitation did not seem to be satisfactory to Tommy, who turned away.

"No, thanks," she said, lightly. "I think I'll walk down to the river and look around."

She felt Josie Brant's gaze boring like a gimlet into the small of her back as she walked away. She knew that the woman hated her, and not without reason. If she had guessed, or Peter Randle had told her anything of his visit to the Ritz, Tommy as the possessor of her secret was more to be hated than the woman who had displaced her in the affections of Jack Salazar. Perhaps she did not know of that incident. It made little difference. She was resentful of the visit to Peter and the intrusion upon what she now probably considered her own proper domain. Tommy had been prepared for Josie's antagonism but she smiled as she went down the path, accompanied by some of the dogs who still showed curiosity as to the delectable and unfamiliar odors. She followed a clearly defined path which brought her presently to a bench by the river where there was a pointed rock to which was moored a canoe. It was all very beautiful, the river running gayly with touches of white where it swirled about the rocks along the

further shore—so beautiful, so like a beautiful blue dragon winding its length to the sea, so like the paintings of it that Fred Wingate had shown her that in its contemplation she forgot for a moment Josie Brant, Peter and the object of her visit. She had, indeed, an intense desire to get into the canoe and go drifting down the stream wherever it would take her.

“Nice view, isn’t it?” came a voice behind her.

Josie had put on her hat with the scarlet thing in it, and a sport coat in large plaids which she wore with a negligent air, defying, as it were, the sartorial elegances of the visitor. In the deep pockets where she kept her hands it might be supposed, if one did not know better, that she held a knife or some other offensive weapon. But her tones as she spoke were dulcet, cool, and incisively polite.

“Yes, very,” said Tommy. “It’s a lovely spot.”

“It is *now*,” added Josie, nervously making conversation. “But this spring—the river came up here and covered this part of the island. That’s how these logs got here. We use them for firewood.”

Tommy fancied an air of proprietorship in the statement.

“I suppose you like living here?” she asked, coolly.

“Oh, yes,” said Josie, warily. “It’s all right,” and then as her eye ran over Tommy swiftly: “You’re from New York, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m Maisie Keith.”

“My name’s Brant.”

These statements were made in the perfect gravity of conveying useful information, but neither offered her hand.

“Oh, yes, of course,” replied Tommy as though she had been reminded of some agreeable fact hitherto forgotten.

Tommy looked at the river. Josie looked at Tommy, corroborating her previous estimates of the cost of her wearing apparel. Neither of these women was subtle, for neither had found in her experience the necessity for the exercise of delicate meanings. Instincts governed them both, but Josie's instincts, on which she had been more frequently forced to depend, were the shrewder and her residence on Peter's island called for an aggressive defense of her position. But the best defense was attack and the moments were precious.

"I think I've heard of you," she said.

"Yes?"

"From Jack Salazar."

"Oh, really!"

Tommy smiled upon Josie coolly, aware of a sinking of her self-esteem.

"I used to go with him," Josie added.

Tommy shrugged indifferently and her bored tone came from long practice. This woman annoyed her.

"Yes, I know it. Peter Randle told me."

Josie put her hands on her hips and swayed aggressively.

"I knew you knew it," she said. "He tells me everything."

This was a declaration of proprietorship. Tommy smiled disagreeably to conceal her incredulity.

"He must be very kind to you. He's that kind of a man—very generous, very easily influenced—ah—by his feelings of pity for every creature in distress."

Josie's face lost color and her eyes grew narrower.

"Distress? Oh, it depends on the way you happen to think about things. That's the way you rich people al-

ways think about the poor. I was broke and sick. But that's no disgrace, I guess." As Tommy made no reply she went on: "It don't make much difference to me what you think. You can call it distress if you like. I guess Peter Randle understands."

Tommy made no reply, merely shrugging her shoulders. And Josie with a sense of an advantage went on: "You were a great friend of Jack Salazar's, weren't you?" she asked again, taking the offensive rapidly. "He used to talk to me about you."

She scored a point, for Tommy flushed.

"Really!" Complete incredulity in the word and a suggestion of superiority.

"Oh, yes. I used to like him but I turned him down. He went with you after that. Have you seen him lately?"

It was a triumph of Broadway effrontery, a little too rugged to be dealt with politely. Tommy had not come here an enemy of this girl, but her anger had risen rapidly.

"No, I haven't," said Tommy, coolly. "Not since I heard how he treated you."

Josie stared. The remark cut deep. But after a tense moment she shrugged a shoulder in the general direction of the river. "Oh, we got along all right. But he got too fresh. And when I heard he was going with you I told him he'd better be going with somebody who wasn't so particular as I was."

Tommy was astonished at the fluency with which Josie delivered the astonishing phrases of this insult. She was seeking in Tommy's replies the substance of what she knew, apparently ready for any brutality. Tommy realized, too, how strong Josie Brant felt her position to be

in the household of Peter Randle to indulge at once in such unusual insults to his guests.

Instead of replying, Tommy with excellent self-control gazed at the blue of the river, trying to forget that the woman was there. As Tommy said nothing, Josie laughed.

"I guess you haven't much to say to *that*, have you?"

"No, nothing," said Tommy, calmly. "Of course I'm very much flattered by your attentions. But I came here to wait for Mr. Randle, and if it's just the same to you I'd rather wait—alone."

"Oh, you would!" cried Josie violently, reverting in her emotion to the sort of language with which she was most familiar. "What did you come here for? That's what I'd like to know," her poise was shattered to bits by some sudden convulsion of the nerves. "You're just trying to break up my friendship with Peter Randle. But you can't, I tell you—"

Tommy's early training had conquered. Indifference had won for her. Josie had given herself away. What she wanted was to drive the visitor from the island before Peter returned. So Tommy composed herself more comfortably upon the bench, her back turned just enough toward Josie to be offensive.

"Oh, you won't answer. Well, I'll tell him the kind of a girl *you* are."

Tommy heard her footsteps moving slowly away and then a man's voice.

"Hello, Josie! What's the row? Martha told me you'd gone this way. Whose is the red car?"

"Mine," said Tommy, getting up from the bench and delighted at the end of this unpleasant interview.

Peter blinked at her a moment and then gave her a

warm greeting. He had had a successful painting day. Everything was rose color.

"Why, Miss Keith! Well, I *am* pleased. How bully you're looking!"

He glanced at Josie, who stood near by, all her violence divested from her as a mantle that was no longer fitting. Peter was still a little puzzled as he looked from one to the other.

"You've met—ah—Miss Brant?"

"Yes, we've been talking—about—how lovely the river is," said Tommy, easily.

"Yes, it is lovely. Lovely!" he muttered. And then more gayly, "I like to come down here and look at it in the afternoon—sapphire and gold. It's in a Wingate mood now."

"Lola and I have just seen his paintings," said Tommy with enthusiasm. "I think I know what you meant about Jimmy Blake's daubs now, Mr. Randle."

"That's fine. I don't think you're quite as modern as you want people to think you are."

They had forgotten Josie, who stood at one side a little behind them, the fingers of one hand nervously twisting a young sprig of green.

"You remember I threatened to visit you. You didn't think I'd come, did you?"

"I'm delighted. Shall we go up to the studio?"

"Not yet, please. I'd rather sit here on this bench." And then quickly, "What I've really been wanting most of all is to go out on the river in that canoe."

"The canoe!"

"I haven't been in one since I was a kid. Could we?"

"Why—of course. The current is pretty swift but we

can paddle up close to the bank and drift down." He glanced at the figure in the background. "We'll be back soon, Josie."

Josie took a pace forward, her lips framed for protest, but the proper expedient lacking, she sank back among the shadows and disappeared as silently as she had come. Tommy had won her way. Peter helped her into the bow facing him, and shoved off, embarking skillfully. This setting suited him, Tommy decided, better than Jimmy Blake's studio or her own over-decorated apartment. He wore a sleeveless army sweater, faded to saffron on the shoulders and an old nondescript soft hat stained with paint. His face was red-bronze and his eyes, shining with pleasant hospitality, matched the blue of the stream. The sleeves of his brown flannel shirt rolled to the elbow disclosed a brown muscular forearm that propelled their craft with a sure stroke along the shore of the island, taking advantage of the back water as they went upstream. It seemed strange to Tommy that a person so virile and intelligent should be the dupe of the ordinary creature who had just given her a taste of her venom. The woman might have a sort of cleverness perhaps when not mastered by her fury, a quiet, injured air that she would wear when it was needed. And Peter Randle would pity her because she was a woman and he was kind. This then, she decided definitely, was their relationship.

In her knowledge of the world, Tommy would already have judged a man who had done the unconventional thing with the calm assurance that Peter Randle had shown. But she realized that he was not to be judged by the standards to be used with other men. His unworldliness defied criticism.

"What were you and Josie talking about when I came up?" he asked her suddenly.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, your voices were raised. At least Josie's was. It almost seemed as though you were quarreling."

His curiosity was her weapon, but the time had not come to use it.

"Quarreling! Why, how absurd!" said Tommy in carelessly astonished tones. "What could we quarrel about?"

Peter eyed her dubiously.

"I—don't know—but—"

"How splendidly you paddle!" said Tommy, gayly. "You're awfully strong. The current's pretty swift, isn't it?"

"We'll strike slackwater above the head of the island all the way out to the point."

He was like a child, easily diverted, and in a moment he settled back, paddling easily.

"Well, it's awfully nice of you to come."

"I wanted to come, Mr. Peter Randle. I wanted you to understand that I'm really grateful for what you did for me. I am, really. It was just chance that sent you my way—just chance that got me a friend. Because you *were* my friend, and I want you to keep on being my friend."

"I do—Miss Keith. I mean—I am, I will—"

"Please don't call me Miss Keith. Nobody else does. It's so terribly formal. Call me Tommy, won't you?" she asked with a jolly smile.

"All right, Tommy. You're really more 'Tommy' than Miss Keith, after all."

"Yes, perhaps. But I'm not really as silly as you think I am."

"I never thought you were silly."

"Er—hysterical, then—"

He laughed. "You do remember things, don't you?"

"When I want to," she replied, demurely. "You know, one of the reasons why I wanted to see you again, was to show you that I'm quite worth while after all—that I've got my serious moments, when I'm rather ashamed of myself. That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"But—ah—I don't see what you've got to be ashamed of."

"Oh, everything. The opportunities I've had and passed by (I'm rich, you know)—the nice things I might have done for people—like you, Peter Randle—and didn't."

"Me!" he exclaimed. "Oh, I never do anything for anybody. I'm terribly self-absorbed. My work, I mean. I'm like a hen with one chick—and that, a duckling."

"A duckling! Isn't your work going right?"

He frowned. "Yes, better. I'm trying to do a certain kind of thing in a certain kind of a way that's my own and not an imitation of Wingate's or Garrett's. I've had a hard time of it. But I think I'm getting it now."

"And what is that?" she asked, sympathetically.

"Not just things. Not just rocks—or trees or water, but those things in the moods of the day, bright, joyous, sullen, restless, grim. Nature is all those things—like human beings Miss—Tommy."

"And you're getting that now? You'll let me see your work, won't you?"

"Yes, if you like."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll succeed. I don't know anything about it, of course. I never thought paintings worth while. Isn't that a terrible confession? But I do want to learn. I think I've learned something already." And she told him what had happened at Wingate's studio. "I can't tell you how small he made me feel. But he didn't want to, really. He's the broadest-minded man I know—"

"And the finest—" put in Peter, with conviction.

"Yes. And it flatters me to feel that I've gained the friendship of a man like that—of a man like you. You'll let me call you Peter, won't you?"

"Why—ah—of course."

She had laid out a definite plan and to this point had carried it out successfully. Nothing that she had said or done was really insincere and as the moments went by she was more than ever conscious of a desire to be of service to him. It was an interest, perhaps, excited by the latent desire in every woman to protect something helpless, and Tommy had only Chiang and Yong, her Pekingese pups, as a vent for her maternal emotions. It was rather an original idea to Tommy to think of a man as a child needing help, than as a predatory animal against whom must be turned all the defensive weapons of her worldliness. All the men that she knew played all their games to win. Here was a man who only wanted to be let alone to do his work and duty as he saw them.

She realized, though, that she had not progressed far upon the real object of her visit. But something warned her that the initiative must come from Peter and not from herself. He was still curious about the conversation with Josie. They would come to that again later.

"I can't imagine living a more—ideal life than this," she said at a venture.

Peter laughed. "It's the only one I'm fitted for, I guess. It's lucky I've got a little money or I'd probably be digging trenches somewhere—not that that's a bad thing to do. I did it in the war. I like manual labor, I do a lot of it around here. But it's always been my idea that a person ought to try to do the best thing that's in him. Of course if he fails at that, he's got to serve the world some other way. I'm just trying things out. I'll see, I'll know after a while."

He stopped again as though in sudden surprise at his own loquacity.

"You were never in business then?" she asked, quickly.

"Business? Good Lord, no. I'm hopeless as a business man. I always do the wrong thing. I've put all my affairs in the hands of a lawyer. He gives me five hundred dollars a month, to pay my rent, buy food, gasoline, paints and canvas. It's all I need—all I want. He invests the rest."

"Wouldn't a Trust Company be better?"

"Safer, you mean? Oh, the fellow is all right—friend of the family—John Henry Dawson. He's clever. None of these get-rich-quick manipulators can get ahead of *him*."

"I see," said Tommy, thoughtfully. "And you're happy, aren't you?"

"Happy? Why, I guess so. I've never thought about that. I'm too busy to think how happy I am or how unhappy. When I'm painting and things are going right, I wouldn't change with anybody in the world."

"Wouldn't it be great if things would go right, like that, all the time?"

"No such luck in this world. The better you get in anything the more exacting you've got to be. There's no end to it."

Peter had reached the point of land and they had swung out into the stream, slowly drifting down.

There was a silence and then Tommy sighed. "And I've been contented just to drift with the tide—like this—It's so easy—so dreadfully easy." She was thoughtful for a moment and then she said, "When I was sitting there waiting for you—before—before Miss Brant came, I thought I'd just like to get into this canoe and drift downstream to the sea. It's my nature to drift—Peter—not fight the current as you do."

She watched his face reading the thoughts that Josie's name had set in motion. He frowned again.

"Miss Brant was talking in a loud voice when I came up," he muttered, "I heard her. What was she saying to you?"

"Oh, nothing," she said in sudden abstraction, aware of the approach of the moment she sought.

"But you must tell me—ah—Tommy."

"Oh, it's of no consequence."

"Was Miss Brant rude to you?"

She smiled. "Why do you ask such a question?"

"She was. Or you'd have denied it at once."

Tommy was now silent. The leaven was working. She had resolved not to be the meddler in his affairs that Red Bridge was, or if she was he should never know that she had meddled. She intended to make use of his obstinacy.

"What's the use of discussing Miss Brant?" she said, thoughtfully, "I came down here to see you."

"All the more reason for her to be polite to you," he put in with sudden warmth. "I can't understand," he began. Then muttered, "Yes, I can. Salazar. She knows I told you her story."

Tommy had taken off a glove and trailed her fingers in the cool water.

"It doesn't matter to me what she says, Peter. It shouldn't matter to you."

"But it does. It does. You're a friend of mine."

"But then, so is she."

He stared at her for a moment blankly. "Well, yes, so she is. A friend. I've done what I could for her. She's been terribly abused. You'd be her friend, too, if you knew how people were talking about her—trying to make me send her out of my house. But they're not going to drive her out—not that way." He gave a stroke or two of the paddle and frowned. "But she mustn't be rude to my guests. What did she say to you?"

"She seemed to resent my visit, as though I were trying to interfere in her affairs." Tommy shrugged her shoulders indifferently and then smiled. "You know better than that, Peter, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"It doesn't make any difference to me what you do," she said with an air of detachment. "I don't think one's friends have the right to interfere in their private affairs. Of course," she added, slowly, "there are exceptions. Like mine, for instance. You did me a good turn even before you knew me—"

"Then all the more reason why you should have a part in my private affairs if you wished."

"No," said Tommy, quickly, "I'd better not. I didn't come down here—"

"But you said you were a friend of mine. And if I want to talk about Miss Brant, I think you might listen."

Her strategy had been successful. His obstinacy throve on argument. She couldn't help smiling at his simplicity. Peter thought her smile indicated the refusal of his request.

"One good turn deserves another," he continued, eagerly. "These people around here have got on my nerves. But you're broad, Tommy, disinterested. I think your advice would—"

"No," she protested with a gesture. "I'd rather you wouldn't—"

"Why not?"

"Because I might not give you the advice you wanted."

"I'll have to take that chance."

"Well," she insisted, "don't you see I might not agree with you at all?"

"I'll have to take chances on that, too." And above her protests he told her what she already had heard through Fred Wingate—of Jane Garrett, Miss McVitty, Johanna Shank and her friends and the Reverend Clarence Snyder.

"Well," he finished, "I resent it all. They've dishonored me and dishonored Josie. I thought once of sending her away somewhere to board, but I can't do it now. It would be a confession of guilt—an admission that all those people were right and that I was wrong. Won't you try

to get Josie's rudeness out of your mind and judge the situation on its merits?"

"You want me to say that you are right," she said.

"No," he asserted, "I just want you to say that a man can take a sick woman into his house without being rotten. I'm not rotten. Neither is Josie. Why should I care what people say?"

"That's up to you, of course," said Tommy.

"But what do you *think*," he insisted.

"If you won't get angry I'll tell you the truth. If you can't stand the truth we'd better drop the subject."

He dovetailed his brown fingers and stared at them.

"Well, you stood hearing the truth from me. I guess I can stand hearing it from you."

"Well, then," she said, measuring her words, "I think the whole thing is as wrong as can be. You can't buck opinion. I thought I had money enough to be and do the things I wished without caring about anybody. And then you came along and upset the apple cart. You're doing the same kind of thing from a different motive—but you're flying in the face of opinion just the same. You ought to have sent Josie Brant away long ago—before this talk started. What good are you doing? You're just hurting yourself. She'd be just as well off somewhere else. I don't care whether you pay for her board or not but she has no business in your house unless you're going to marry her. And, of course, that's impossible, for any one of a dozen reasons."

She paused, wiping her fingers daintily on her handkerchief. He watched her motions with abstracted interest. Her fingers, he observed, were very flexible and expressive. She had a grace, too, that appealed to his sense

of beauty. But her opinions were not logical—scarcely even reasonable.

“You say the whole thing is wrong. Why? That’s what that little pink minister said. But he didn’t know anything about it. He talked about appearances. You know better. Why is it wrong? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Because you can’t make people think the way you want them too, just by being obstinate. Suppose *I* had the nerve to come and live in your house the way this girl does. I’d deserve everything they said about me. If she had any self-respect she’d have gotten out long ago.”

“I say—that’s pretty rough on Josie—”

“There you go,” said Tommy with a frown. “I knew you didn’t want my opinion.”

“But I do—only—”

“What—”

“You may be prejudiced.”

“As to the facts of the situation—no. As to Josie Brant—yes.” She leaned against the back rest and gazed across the river. “We’d better say no more about it,” she muttered.

“But why are you prejudiced against Josie Brant?” he asked eagerly.

“Oh, what’s the use?”

“Well, I want to know.”

She straightened, both hands on the gunwale of the canoe, looking at him. “Because she’s not your kind, Peter Randle. Because I know something about her history and because all the things these people are saying about her are true. You needn’t believe them if you don’t want to. I don’t ask you to. You asked me. I’m

just telling you." As she finished, she lay back and stared into the water.

"You mean," he said, stolidly, after a moment, "that you've heard these old stories that they're telling and believe them?"

"Yes."

He sawed the air excitedly.

"But they're not true, I tell you. She loved Jack Salazar. That was her mistake. Those old stories are not true. I know they're not true."

"How do you know?"

"Why—why—" he stammered, helplessly, frowning and blinking. "Why—Josie told me so herself."

Tommy gasped; gazed at him incredulously for a moment and then made an expressive gesture with her hands.

"In that case there's nothing more to be said. I think we'd better be getting in now."

They were already below the landing place. Peter picked up his paddle thoughtfully and stroked the canoe in toward the bank. Neither spoke until they landed.

"I told you that you didn't want to know my opinions. I only came to renew our friendship. I've only succeeded in making myself uncomfortable and you unhappy."

"Unhappy? No," he said, slowly. "Not unhappy—except for Josie Brant. But I believe what she tells me, and I know she's abused. It's the principle that's involved. You couldn't see it. It's too bad. You've made it a little harder for me, that's all."

"I'm sorry, but you insisted—"

"Yes, I did. I insisted. You had a perfect right to express your opinion."

"Let's talk of something else." She glanced at her

wrist watch. "You'll let me see your pictures, won't you?"

Tommy had failed. His ingenuous confession of faith in Josie had as with a blow knocked all the props from under her. He cared nothing for the woman, she was sure, and yet, because the odds were against her in almost every respect, had placed himself without compromise upon her side. Nothing could dissuade him from his idiocy. He was still determined to do the wrong thing magnificently. She was angry at him but she pitied him too.

They walked slowly back to the studio, talking with assumed indifference of other things. Josie Brant to her relief did not appear, though Tommy had an unpleasant feeling that she hovered somewhere near them. Tommy inspected his pictures and commented on them colorlessly, for the joy was out of the day. With the apparent hope of rescuing the situation he offered her tea and cinnamon buns, which she refused. And presently, with a sense of relief, she took her departure. He helped her into the car, then gazed at her gloomily.

She gave him her most garish smile. But he leaned forward speaking in a low, tense voice.

"Forgive me, Tommy. I'm afraid I've been rude to you. But I do want your friendship. You'll give it to me, won't you—even if we don't agree?"

"Yes, of course. And you'll come to see me in New York?"

"Yes, yes."

There was a whirr of machinery, a rush of vapor and dust and amid a wild yelping and scampering of dogs, the red car reached the bridge and climbed the hill to the canal, leaving Peter dully watching until it was out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE STUDIO

PETER had scarcely reëntered the studio when Josie appeared, miraculously, at the other door. She looked very ill, he thought, when compared to Tommy Keith's bright prettiness. He would have preferred it if she had not come into the studio at that moment, for he wanted to be alone. He had, too, a reproof for her on account of her rudeness to his visitor. But he did not wish to speak of that or indeed of anything personal until he had had time to think of the whole situation as presented to him through the vision of his visitor.

He picked up a pipe and filled it thoughtfully, while Josie, with a sense of impending difficulties, made herself busy about the hearth. Peter slowly unpacked his painting kit, saying nothing. Josie waited a moment at the door, as though about to speak, but Peter did not look at her and so with a glance at him, she went out, silently closing the door.

Peter had propped his painting against a chair and sat, bent forward, examining it. But after a while he got up and went to the mantel where he stood, his back to the fireplace, his brows lowered in thought. It was curious that this new and last attack upon the reputation of Josie Brant should have affected him more profoundly than any of the others. What was most impressive, perhaps, was the fact that Tommy Keith had given him her opinion against her will and only after repeated solicita-

tions upon his part. He liked Tommy. Peter always liked the people to whom he had been of service, and Tommy had requited his rather cheeky interposition in her affairs with an excellent grace and a pleasing gratitude. She was, he had discovered, quite contrary to his expectations, a human sort of a creature, very spoiled, very self-sufficient, of course, but clever and companionable with a discriminating intelligence, rather above that of most of the crowd in New York with which she traveled. And she seemed, for some reason of which he could not be aware, to return his amiable regard. Women of her sort had always been annoying to Peter, because he never understood their mental pirouettes and they usually paid his incomprehension its due by pirouetting in other directions. He and Tommy had clashed at Jimmy Blake's studio and she had laughed at, rather than with, him. But he had decided that it was good-natured laughter, and that he had not minded it in the least. Of course, Tommy was too rich ever to amount to anything in contributing to the wisdom of the world—too rich even for her own peace of mind. Life to Tommy, he had thought, was just one succession of gratified frivolous impulses. He couldn't understand how anybody could be constantly doing the sort of things she did and have any character.

But since his visit to her apartment and her visit to him to-day, he decided that he had been mistaken. It was an excellent sign that she was occasionally bored with the sort of life that she lived and that she could find pleasure in the simplicities of Red Bridge. She had been quite like a child about wanting to go out with him in the canoe and had, until his unfortunate persistence in regard to the gossip about Josie, seemed to be enjoying herself a

great deal in his society. There was a real friendliness in her manner to him, a kind of wistful regret at her own lack of culture and a genuine eagerness to learn something about interests such as his and Wingate's.

There had been no doubting her friendship or the genuineness of her opinions. These, she had expressed, at his urging, with a definiteness that left no doubt as to her belief in her own judgment. Nor had there seemed any doubt even after his championship of Josie, that Tommy Keith still persisted in believing the stories that she had been told, rather than Peter's refutation of them. To be sure, he had only had Josie's word, and that should have been sufficient for any one—as it had been, for him. But he had an unpleasant feeling that Josie's corroboration of her innocence, as a counter-argument, had fallen surprisingly flat with Tommy Keith.

Women, even the best of them, it seemed, were strangely cruel in their judgments of their own sex. Johanna Shank, Charlotte McVitty, Jane Garrett, Alice Frear, all excellent women according to their lights, reputable and highly esteemed, given to deeds of altruism in the community, members of the church, had each of them gone out of her way to condemn and chastise this poor sick refugee of his and try to convince him that every consideration of decency required that he dismiss her from his house. Decency! They were so damned decent themselves that they thought they had a monopoly of that prosaic quality. And now, his new and agreeable friend, Tommy Keith, a person who could have no possible interest in contributing to Josie's misfortunes, had added her voice to the acclaim. And yet . . . yes—there was the affair of Jack Salazar! A prejudice against a woman

who had possessed the man she cared for! Of course, Tommy Keith could not be so magnanimous as to forgive Josie for that, even though the experiences of the unfortunate girl had been the means of saving her, perhaps, from a similar folly. Peter felt that he was getting below the surface of things, probing at the root of Tommy's intolerance. She disliked Josie. That was why she had tried to avoid speaking of her, only expressing herself with frankness when forced to do so by Peter's obstinate insistence.

It was too bad that the opinions of women were given such a bias by the social dogma. Josie belonged in a lower social stratum than that enjoyed by the Misses McVitty, who were the leaders in manners in this part of the Delaware Valley; Alice Frear was a Watson of Philadelphia; Mrs. Shank came from an excellent Colonial stock of Pennsylvania Germans; Jane Garrett—well, Jane Garrett was a lady born and bred; and, of course, Miss Keith with her apartment at the Ritz could have little in sympathy with this poor waif, who had been forced to sell tickets in a movie theater for her living. Josie Brant was not of their cloth or in their class. She had had none of their birth and breeding and few of their advantages in education. She was poor. She was ill. She had no relatives to come to her aid for defense in this time of her trouble. And the little that Peter had thought it his duty to do for her had only made her position more painful.

Frederick Wingate had warned him of what he might expect in a community like Red Bridge, but Peter, already convinced of his duty, had not heeded this advice. Wingate had said nothing more and had carefully avoided

all reference to Josie, taking the hint, as these women had not done, that Peter felt himself fully capable of managing his own affairs. Wingate did not come often to the studio and Peter fancied that his friend did not feel the same sympathy for Josie that Peter did. Perhaps it was this coldness on Wingate's part that had created the prejudice that Josie had once or twice expressed to Peter against Wingate. It was all too damned bad that people couldn't see Josie's misfortunes as Peter saw them, but there was nothing that any one had said to him that gave Peter any reason to change his mind or to modify his intention to take care of Josie until she was well enough to go out into the world again and make her own way.

Thus Peter argued, answering with a logic that seemed unanswerable, the prejudices and arguments of Josie's detractors. He therefore emerged from his hour of solitude with a new conviction that Josie was more than ever to be pitied and that his own decision was unassailable.

After supper he invited Josie into the studio. The days were growing longer, and a violet glow flooded through the skylight into this sanctuary of Peter's, modifying its gloom, and touching his brasses and porcelains with agreeable little points of light. Josie's face seemed paler than usual, the shadows under her eyes more wistful. She had not spoken at table except when he had addressed her and seemed to portray in face and demeanor a new sense of the significance of her sorrow. It seemed, too, that she was aware of a new crisis in her affairs, for when Peter brought up a chair for her to the hearth, she sank into it listlessly, her head bowed as though ex-

pecting to hear some unpleasant sentence pronounced upon her at once.

Peter, ill at ease, puffed the room blue with pipe smoke before he began to speak, aware of the sheen of dull blue upon her bent head and the elusiveness of her profile which was lost among the shadows. He spoke gravely, for it would have seemed a cruelty to add to her burdens.

"What were you saying to Miss Keith, Josie, when I came down to the landing?"

She moved uneasily.

"Why, I don't know—" she said, as though groping for her thoughts. "Nothing much, I guess."

"Well, your voice was raised—it seemed, unpleasantly. I hope you weren't rude to her."

"Rude? I—" She flashed around at him with just a trace of defiance. "Well, I've got a right to be rude to her if she was rude to me," she said childishly.

"Oh. And how was she rude to you, Josie?"

"The way she acted—what she said. She spoke about Jack Salazar—crowed over me because she took him away from me. I guess you'd be rude, too, if anybody did that kind of thing to you."

Peter couldn't imagine being placed in a similar position but wagged his head and frowned. He couldn't imagine Tommy Keith crowing over Josie, but then, women could always be trusted to do surprising things.

"Are you sure you aren't mistaken?" he asked. "You may be sensitive—"

"Oh, I'm sensitive, all right," said Josie, a ring of bitterness in her voice. "I'm sensitive enough already about the trouble I'm in without this Maisie Keith coming down

here and rubbing it in the way she did." She paused a moment and bent her head. "I don't want to complain. But it all comes of your telling my troubles to outsiders." Her demeanor of complete submission to the inevitable completely belied the bitterness of her tones. Peter was very uncomfortable. He had done this woman a wrong which had seemed to grow heinous in exact ratio to their growing intimacy.

"I—I'm sorry, Josie," he muttered.

"It seems to me," she went on mournfully, "that I wouldn't have cared about anybody knowing about me except that woman."

"Why do you dislike her so much?"

She raised her head quickly and turned toward him, her veiled eyes flashing.

"Isn't it enough that she knows my secret trouble—that she's the woman who took Jack Salazar away from me—without coming down here, with her fine clothes and her red automobile, to play the lady over me? You thought she came down here just to pay a friendly call, didn't you? Well, she didn't. I know. She came down here to talk to you about me and make things worse. She *did* talk to you about me, didn't she?"

This evidence of Josie's gift of divination rather took Peter aback.

"Why, yes," he admitted, dubiously. "She spoke of you."

"I thought so," Josie said with triumphant assurance. Then asked violently. "What did she say about me?"

Peter bit down hard upon his pipestem.

"Nothing new—nothing that I hadn't heard before."

"What?"

"Oh, just the old stories from Milestown—she believed them, Josie."

"Of course she would. She wanted to believe them. I guess you know now why she wanted to go out with you in the canoe—so she could get you away from here and try to poison you against me. And you listened to her—"

"Yes, I listened, Josie."

She bent her head away from him again.

"I didn't think you'd go back on me now whatever you did in New York, before we knew each other so well. I thought you believed me when I told you those stories were all lies."

"Yes. I did believe you."

"But you listened to Maisie Keith."

"Well, that needn't matter to you, if I haven't changed my opinion."

Josie turned in her chair.

"You mean," she gasped, "that you didn't pay any attention to her?"

"I mean," said Peter, slowly, "that I told her she had been—er—misinformed as the others were." He turned toward the skylight as though addressing it. "I've stuck by you, Josie. I've done the right thing by you. I thought I owed you that." And then as his brows tangled: "But I think you'll admit that you owe me perfect frankness in return."

"Of course—"

"What I mean is this. There are a lot of people who seem to think you're—er—not what you should be. You've denied those stories and I've believed you because I wanted to believe you. But you ought to tell me if there's anything at all—any fire to cause so much smoke—"

"No, no," she gasped. "There's nothing, I swear it—" She broke off with a dry sob. "As if I didn't have enough to bear already without all these rotten lies." She rose and swung her arms about wildly. "If they want to drive me out of the neighborhood, just for these stories of Mrs. Beamish, what will they want to do to me when they find out the truth?" She flung herself headlong upon the couch, her fingers writhing among the pillows. "My God, I don't know what to do. I guess I'd ought to go away to a hospital somewhere and have my baby— Sometimes I'm nearly crazy thinking about what's going to happen in the future. You've been so kind to me that I think if you went back on me now, I'd kill myself." She raised a distorted face toward him. "Why didn't you let me jump into the canal that night when I was going to! Why did you bring me here and treat me the way you did, only to make me feel you're the one person in the world I've got to tie to. Why did you do it? Why didn't you just let me die when I wanted to? I didn't ask you to save me— Oh, God, I wish I was dead . . . !"

In all his experience, Peter had not had his feelings so deeply lacerated. But then his experience with women of the neurotic or pseudo-neurotic type had been limited. Dry hysterics—in its most distressing manifestations. Peter stared at her in dismay, and then with a folly born of his helplessness in the face of the extraordinary situation, bent over her, laying a hand gently upon her shoulder, patting it as though she had been a suffering dog from his pack.

"There, there," he said, gently and soothingly.

"Oh, God," her voice repeated from the pillows, "why didn't you let me die!"

"There, there, Josie," said Peter again, his fingers timidly stroking her forearm. "There, there, now."

"Oh, God!" Her fingers found and clutched his. And then as though this contact had suddenly touched the source of her emotions, loosening her drawn nerves, she burst into a wild torrent of tears. His hand was engulfed and he did not withdraw it, for this he thought would have been cruelty when she needed it so.

"Oh, Mr. Randle—Peter. I'm so—so miserable. Don't go away from me. I—I want you. I need you."

"There, there, now," said Peter, petting her shoulder with his other hand.

"D—don't send me away from you. I'm so—so helpless. And you—you've been so kind to me." She bent her head to his hand and kissed it again and again. She reminded him of a grateful dog, requiting a kindness and the idea was very distressing to him.

"Don't, Josie," he whispered. "Don't."

But she only clasped his hand more tightly, holding it, he thought, with the desperation that told her need and dependence.

"Oh, let me, Peter. If you knew how happy it makes me—"

"Oh, ah—that's all right then. That's all right, Josie."

The back of her neck was like a child's, its two tendons so slender, so white, so vulnerable. She seemed very small in the big room, a huddled little heap of feminine weaknesses and indecisions. And so he petted her as he would have done a weeping child. Was there any other palliative for childish weeping? If so he did not know it. She

clung to him as he bent over her, mumbling consolatory phrases.

"Y—you listened to that woman—you listened to those others when they came trying to get you to send me out of your house. I knew. They all want me to go away. They think you're too good for me. Don't I know it? I know you are. I guess I'm not fit to be your friend—"

"Don't say that. That's nonsense. I won't have you talking like that."

"It's the truth. I know it. I'm not fit to shine your shoes."

"Stop that, Josie. I won't have it, do you hear?" he insisted.

She straightened her head slowly and dried her eyes on the sleeve of the arm that wasn't around his shoulder.

"Well, that's the way I feel. I'd do anything for you. I didn't even care about the lies they told about me, so long as you cared enough about my being happy to let me stay. I wouldn't even care about Maisie Keith if I knew that you didn't believe her! The only thing I care about is having your good opinion. I'd even be willing to go away from here if you thought it was the best thing for me to do. I wouldn't want to go and I wouldn't know what to do, but if you think I ought to, I'll just go and try to find some way to get along—until—" She stopped in the throes of a fit of trembling and put her arms around him more closely. "But I'm frightened, Peter, when I see how cruel people can be to a girl like me who is up against it and no way to turn."

"Now don't you worry, Josie."

"How—how can I help worrying!" she said, tremulously. "Here I am in your house and every minute I

stay I know I'm doing you a wrong, because these people will soon be willing to believe the worst of me and you. Don't you understand? It's terrible! But I can't seem to make up my mind to go and leave you. I'm so weak, Peter, and you've been so strong and kind to me. I never knew what kindness was until I came here to this house."

"There, there, now. . . ."

"But I can't stand the thought of those people thinking you've kept me here because you had to. It's not right for them to think like that after the fine innocent way you've been with me. That's what worries me. That's what makes me think I've got to get the strength to go away somewheres where nobody will know me and what happens won't matter."

"Well, if I don't mind what people say, why should you?" said Peter warmly. "They can't hurt me. They've done all they can."

"No, they haven't. They'll try to ruin you the way they'll ruin me."

"Well, let them," Peter growled with a touch of his old obstinacy. "There was a time when I thought you'd better go. But I'm not going to let you go now. You're going to stay here, Josie."

She raised her face to his.

"Oh, Peter, do you mean it?"

"Yes, I do. I mean it."

She wept softly now, her head on his shoulder. Her hair tickled his nose and he felt her heart thumping against his breast. It was all very extraordinary. His fingers still patted her thin shoulder blades gently. He had never realized that women were so delicately made. She was so small, so pathetically childish to be the serious

custodian of this terrible mystery of new life. Could she understand the significance of her obligations? That was hardly possible. She seemed more like a child, weary with the consequences of its ignorance and folly.

The light failed at the great north window and it grew dark in the studio. The woman still lay against his breast, breathing more gently. But Peter had not moved. He was afraid that he might disturb her. His fingers still moved soothingly upon her back and at last she seemed to be asleep. But Peter's eyes were wide open, staring at the gray patch where the skylight was. The stars were out, peering in at them. This woman needed him. It was in his power to help her—perhaps to build from her weaknesses a strength and nobility splendid and enduring. It was a life that had been entrusted to him—two lives perhaps. And in that moment, with a certainty that eliminated everything but the sense of his own power to help, Peter silently consecrated himself to this obligation.

The woman stirred in his arms.

"Peter," she murmured.

"It's all right, Josie," he said gently.

CHAPTER IX

REVELATIONS

1

THE failure of Tommy Keith's mission to Red Bridge had left her with mingled feelings of exasperation and amusement. She was not one who did things by halves, and having thoroughly committed herself to the task of opening Peter Randle's eyes to the true quality of his guest, her repulse had given her an unpleasant sense of inadequacy to which she was not accustomed. And yet, as she went over her conversation with Peter she could not see that she had made any tactical errors. Her approach to his affair from an angle had been a flank movement, executed with skill intended to take him off his guard; but she had found his obstinacy as impervious to her arguments from the side of disinterested friendship as though her interest were of no account to him whatever. And the whole of his confutation with which he seemed quite satisfied rested entirely upon the denials of facts by Josie Brant herself.

His point of view was too absurd even to be amusing. It was the word of Josie Brant against all of Red Bridge—and all of New York, for that matter. Fred Wingate had said that Peter's hospitality had some of the qualities of the Homeric tradition in which men feared the wrath of the gods if they failed to treat with kindness the stranger within their gates. Tommy didn't know

much about Homer, but if the ancient Greeks had anything on Peter Randle in the matter of the stranger within their gates they were fully entitled to the leather medal.

In their brief voyage in the canoe, Tommy had studied Peter diligently, and had been rewarded by the conviction that he was above guile of any sort. It was, therefore, a pity that his simplicity should not be played on by one more worthy than Josie Brant who had, it seemed, already taken every advantage of his generosity and credulity to serve her own ends. This meant that the woman intended to remain under Peter's protection until her baby was born, thus possibly placing upon him in the eyes of the community the imputation of guilt. Was it conceivable that Peter Randle was not aware of this transparent device? Was it possible that Josie Brant could carry out her plan in spite of all the efforts of Peter's friends? What a fool he was!

Of two things she was sure. She had returned from Peter's island, filled with a dislike for this woman more violent than any that she had ever known for any living creature. For Josie had, by a mere manipulation of the English language, placed Tommy on a parity with herself, an achievement that Tommy had thought scarcely possible, and only accomplished by a ruthless use of phrase that Tommy had matched with difficulty. She hated the woman as one hates upon the stage—violently with every hope of her dire misfortune. And these sentiments toward Josie were nicely balanced by her pity for Peter, the altruist, who had fallen a victim to his passion for helping creatures in distress. His imbecile idealism had, in a way, captured Tommy's imagination. All her

life she had been accustomed to men who believed they were entitled to what they wanted. Here was one who defended only his right to give, when, and where he chose. His loyalty to a lost cause had every aspect of amiable martyrdom. In the studio she had felt very much like taking him by the shoulders and shaking him. But he had been very gentle with her as though aware of some mental reservations of his own as to her opinions about the visitor so clearly and audibly expressed. And when she had driven away, he had worn such a puzzled expression that it seemed a pity to leave him without another effort to make him see the light. But he had closed the door to controversy. She had no arguments not already advanced and her pride had rebelled at the thought of a further discussion of the execrable creature whom he defended.

She had said little to Wingate and Lola when they had inquired as to the results of her mission. She had merely shrugged her shoulders, lightly proclaimed Peter impossible, and suggested to Lola that it was time they were on their way to New York. When Wingate had insisted on hearing what had happened she became more and more vague, dismissing the subject with a gesture and reminding him of the painting that he had promised her. She had, curiously enough, since this intimate study of Peter and his folly, a distaste for a talk which would present Peter as a conspicuous target for Lola's irony or even Wingate's diatribes. She had, already, a sense that Peter's amiable weaknesses had dignity enough to be respected and a feeling that her failure was her affair and Peter's and not to be discussed.

On the drive home, she talked at random about every-

thing under the sun but Peter, until Lola with characteristic pungency probed directly beneath the casual commonplace of Tommy's conversation.

"Well, Tommy, you do beat all," she said, laughing. "We've done a run of sixty miles or so with a rather special object of rescuing a good guy from the wiles of a second-rate vamp, thus proving virtue always triumphant over evil. Twice you've sent my heart into my mouth flirting coyly with death at crossings and once you've consented to a minimum speed of sixty miles an hour. Don't you think you owe me something?"

"What?" said Tommy, smiling.

"Information—that's all. I'm only human. And I've got a right to a little reasonable curiosity, haven't I?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Just what happened."

"Nothing happened. We went out in a canoe. It didn't upset or anything. We just talked a little. I felt I was messing in Peter Randle's affairs. He felt so, too. And then we came in. That's all."

"Do you mean to tell me that Peter paid no attention to your remarks?"

"Oh, yes. He was very polite. But he gave me to understand that he was quite capable of managing his own affairs."

"Idiot!"

Tommy drove carefully around a farm wagon. "I'm sorry I went. I don't want to talk about it."

And opening the throttle, she sent the car down a straight road at a speed that made conversation impossible. As they drove into a town Lola studied her profile a moment.

"Tommy," she said, "if I didn't know how indifferent you were to the opinions of people I'd say your pride has been hurt."

"Oh, no."

"I'd say, moreover," she continued with a clarity that was startling, "that you were very much interested in Mr. Peter Randle."

"Nonsense!" said Tommy, abruptly. "Don't be a fool, Lola."

Lola glanced at her, smiled, but said nothing.

It was after dark when they reached the ferry where they were delayed for half an hour by a traffic jam, so Tommy was in no very good humor when she reached Lola's apartment building. Lola asked her in to dinner but Tommy said that she was tired and drove on to her hotel. It had been a tiresome day after all. All days were tiresome to Tommy that were not crowned with success.

Her late return to town had already prevented keeping an engagement with Jimmy Blake for a dinner and dance at the *Maréchale*, but she managed to get him on the telephone, and making the excuse that she was very tired, bathed, got into a dressing gown and denying herself to callers took supper alone in her apartment. She had been a little amazed and more than a little annoyed at Lola's comment on her reticence to speak of her visit. It was quite true that she had a sense of pique that her opinions had not been received by Peter with a higher appreciation; she was vexed, too, that Peter had merely accepted her visit upon its face value, refusing for a second time to be aware of the fact that she was a woman and charming. For this was not a reasonable

attitude for a man to take toward a pretty woman who had driven sixty or seventy miles to try to keep him from making a fool of himself. If she had been a man, their conversation could not have been more devoid of those subtleties of appreciation which Tommy expected from the men she liked. Lola had said that she was becoming interested in Peter Randle. Was she? Funny idea, that. Tommy tossed a bit of cake to the begging Pekingese and sipped her coffee. An interest—yes; but an interest that hardly answered the meaning of Lola's insinuation. She owed this man a debt and he had not permitted her to repay it. She was sorry for him—but angry, too, that he could face the difficulties in store for him with such bland composure and amiability. She had done what she could to make him aware of those difficulties and had failed. There was nothing else . . . but she was still sorry for him. . . .

2

It was several weeks before Tommy heard even indirectly from Red Bridge. Fred Wingate wrote that he was painting the spring, a change of subject for one whose reputation was founded so securely on the story of winter. He had seen little of Peter except on the roads or in the village where they merely "passed the time of day" and went on about their business. Peter had changed, Wingate thought. He wore a puzzled air and seemed more absent-minded than ever. But Josie Brant was still at his house, though she was seen no more in the village.

Tommy had thought once or twice of writing to him again and had even begun a note which she had read and

destroyed. There seemed to be a great deal that she would have liked to say to him, but her rhetorical skill did not seem equal to the task of expressing it. She had hoped, too, that Peter might think it worth while to send her a few of his thoughts upon her visit and the further development of their curious friendship. But nothing came from him. It seemed that he was bent on ignoring the whole incident.

And then one morning early in May he called unannounced at her apartment. Tommy had risen late and was, at the moment, drinking her coffee. But she sent word that she would see him, dressed quickly and went to the drawing-room, where she found him playing with the two Pekingese pups, with an air of being very much at home.

"Well, Peter," she said with a laugh. "You have the air that a call upon a young female scarcely out of her bath is one of the best things you do."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, apologetically. "I thought by coming early I might catch you before you went out."

"Why didn't you write—or wire—or even telephone?"

"Oh, I've got out of the habit of the plaguy things. But I did catch you. Are you going to be busy?"

"Er—no—not for a while."

"I hoped you might come out with me for a walk in the Park. It's too splendid to stay in."

"A walk! Don't you know that this isn't Red Bridge? In New York nobody walks unless he's going somewhere."

"Well, we'll go somewhere then," he said, brightly. "To the zoo, say. I want to talk to you."

"Of course. I'll go. I had a date with Irma at the

dressmaker's—her new trousseau—you know. It's all in pale violet. Victor's 'tone-color' she calls it—and it goes so well with his yellow hair. But she can wait. She *will* be marrying all the time. . . .”

And while Peter listened to these modern remarks with a bewildered air, she caught up the telephone and called the engagement off.

She appeared in a moment, in a smart little dark hat that matched her walking suit, took up a cane in the hallway and they went down to the street. There was a fine air from the south, cool enough for a walk in the shade, warm enough for a seat in the sun. The blue overhead was flecked with gold and the sunlight danced gayly on the bright-work of automobiles on their way down to the shopping district. Police whistles sounded and the current of the stream, stemmed for a moment, resumed its flow with new vigor. Though a New Yorker, Peter was always amazed at the desperate needs of the traffic on the Avenue. He couldn't imagine situations urgent enough to require this constant risk of life and limb. Women gestured frantically from the windows of limousines, chauffeurs lost their tempers, bewildered old gentlemen shook their canes, children scampered, daring the venture of the dangerous passage. Where were they all going? And why the haste?

“Society is an anthill,” said Peter, laconically.

“I haven't much use for the police department,” said Tommy, the chauffeuse. “But they *do* run things well,” added Tommy, the pedestrian.

“There's method in an anthill, too.”

They managed to reach the security of a path in the Park and strode briskly northward. Idlers upon the

benches lowered newspapers and stared at them, Tommy with her cane and Peter in his faded hat and uncreased trousers. They seemed like a part of the flotsam of the Avenue, diverted together by some chance swirl of the current into the more quiet backwater. But neither Tommy nor Peter was aware of the attention their conjunction had caused, for Tommy was talking of many things and Peter was listening, adding, from time to time, some comment upon her remarks. They had the appearance of capital and labor reaching a comfortable understanding.

They did not go to the zoo. They leaned on the parapet of a bridge over the bridle path for a while and then Tommy found a deserted bench near the lake where they sat and watched the children paddling about on the water. Their conversation had, until the present moment, been confined to general topics. But now Peter stretched his long legs toward the sun and settled back in comfortable relaxation.

"I suppose you think it's funny—ah—Tommy, my coming to see you so early in the morning—without 'phoning or anything."

"I was glad to see you, Peter."

"Well, it's nice of you. But to tell the truth, I came because I really wanted your advice—sort of inspiration, you know—didn't think of it until I was getting out of bed this morning."

"Advice?" Tommy said, dubiously—aware unpleasantly of her previous adventure.

But Peter's reply quickly reassured her that the advice he needed was of a different sort.

"I thought that you seemed a practical sort of a per-

son. You're got a lot of money and you must have had a lot of business dealings of one kind or another—"

"Business! Good Lord! Why do you think I know anything about business?"

"Don't you?"

"A little. Not much. My Aunt Sophy Whitehead's husband looks after things in a general way. My business is done mostly through a Trust Company. I know what my money ought to yield and I know that I get it. It's just multiplication in decimals. I can do that."

Peter smiled. "I guess that's about all anybody needs to know. But then, you have valuable business connections—people you can rely on." He paused a moment. "Here's my situation. I think I told you that my affairs were in the hands of my cousin Joseph and Mr. Dawson, and that Dawson pays me five hundred dollars a month to keep things going at Red Bridge."

Tommy nodded, very much interested. Peter drew up one leg and clasped his hands around its knee, frowning at the sunlight on the tops of the west-side apartment buildings.

"Well, I—ah—I've suddenly decided that I wanted to get all of my income paid to me instead of having it re-invested for the future. My whole estate ought to be about four hundred thousand—fifteen to twenty thousand a year. Understand?"

"Yes, of course. And now you want that?"

"Yes. I—ah— Things are getting more and more expensive; I thought I might—ah—make some improvements to the house and studio."

"I see. And what's the difficulty?"

Peter shook his head uncertainly.

"Well, I—ah—I want to tell you about it. You know I'm not a practical sort of a cuss, at least I didn't use to be. I used to put money into all sorts of things that turned out wrong. But I think I've gotten over all that sort of—ah—credulity. At any rate, it's my own money and whether I've gotten over being credulous or not, I've got a right to have it all if I want it."

"Sure you have. And who's going to stop you?"

"Well, one or two things have happened that have made me a little uneasy. I went to see Cousin Joe Randle who was my adviser. He's my father's brother's son. It was through Cousin Joe that I first decided to put my business in the hands of his lawyer. When I told him the other day what I'd decided to do, he advised very strongly against it. I told him that I'd made up my mind. He argued with me—"

"*That* was a mistake," said Tommy with a laugh.

"What was?"

"Arguing with you when you'd made up your mind."

"Oh." He stared at her vacuously for a moment before he went on. "Well, I always liked Joe. We never saw much of each other or anything like that, but he was less stiff-necked than the rest of the cousins and we got along all right. I told him I'd made up my mind, that I was going down to see Dawson, and asked him if he wouldn't go along. It would have been a friendly thing to do. But he refused."

"Wait a moment, Peter," said Tommy, suddenly thoughtful. "Did this Cousin Joe Randle have anything to do with the disposition of your money?"

"Yes. He and Dawson together were supposed to make decision about investments, draw checks, and so forth."

"They really had power of attorney to act for you in everything?"

"Yes. Power of attorney," said Peter with an air of grasping at a successful phrase. "I went on down to the office of John Henry Dawson."

Peter released his knee and bent forward, staring at the ground.

"Doesn't it seem funny to you that a man shouldn't do what he wants to do with his own money? Dawson argued with me the way Joe had done. He brought out a lot of papers and figures and showed me how many of the securities my money was in had deteriorated in value so that some of them weren't even paying dividends."

"Do you mean to say," Tommy asked, severely, "that you haven't kept in touch with things? That you didn't know anything at all about your affairs?"

"No. Not much. I didn't want to be bothered. Well, all that was right, I guess. But what wasn't all right was Dawson's whole manner of evasion which gave me the impression that he didn't think I'd better do what I wanted to do with my own money."

"Is the power of attorney revocable?"

"Yes. He made me angry and I guess I was impolite. I don't like to get angry, but I didn't like the way he talked. The long and short of it was that he promised to give me a full statement of the exact condition of my affairs in a day or so."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"No. I'm going to-morrow. But I've got the idea in my head that Dawson is going to try to evade me again in some way. I can't tell why I think so. He was very polite, but he seemed to be uncertain, somehow—you

might almost say disturbed. He gave me a very unpleasant feeling of intruding in something that was none of my affair."

"What do you know about this man Dawson?" Tommy asked. "You say he was your cousin's lawyer. What sort of standing has he?"

"Oh, all right, I guess. He and Joe went to college together. Maybe I'm all wrong the way I feel about things. But I had to talk to somebody, and I just wanted it to be you. I'm an awful nuisance. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. I'd like to help you if I can. You said something about my business connections—"

"Well, I thought I ought to have this whole thing looked into by somebody who can check the thing up—somebody reliable who is clever enough to act in my place."

Instead of replying at once to his suggestion Tommy made hieroglyphics with the ferrule of her cane in the walk.

"You don't think there's actually been anything crooked, do you, Peter?"

"Oh, no. Not that. Just mismanagement or carelessness at the worst. You see," he added, cheerfully, "there was Cousin Joe, as a check on Dawson."

"I see. And I think I can help you. There's Uncle Matthew Whitehead. Or better yet," she added, "a young fellow at the Trust Company, Mr. John Kingsley, a lawyer who attends to all my affairs. Do you want me to speak to him?"

"That's mighty fine of you—ah—Tommy. Yes, if you will. I don't want to hurt Dawson's feelings, but if your

friend could just go to Dawson's office to-morrow with me as a friend to advise me, I'd feel a lot more comfortable."

"That can be arranged, I'm sure. I'll get him on the 'phone as soon as we get back to the hotel."

They said nothing more of Peter's business affairs, for Tommy rose and they slowly turned toward one of the Fifth Avenue entrances to the Park. She felt that Peter's visit and the unexpected nature of his confidences were a great tribute to his friendship for her. Of course she knew nothing of Cousin Joe or of Lawyer Dawson, but it seemed reasonably obvious that if for some reason the credulous Peter's credulity was strained to the point of seeking advice, his business affairs might fairly be considered to be in a questionable condition. She had a friendly sense of sharing his inquietude—but of course there was a chance of his exaggeration of the details of the situation which might not be so bad as he had found it. Stocks *were* low. Some of them, as she was aware, were not even paying dividends.

Perhaps even stronger than her sympathy with Peter in his predicament was the curiosity that he had aroused by his sudden determination to draw the whole of his income and live upon it. Fifteen or twenty thousand a year, she supposed, would be a large amount to be spent in a small place like Red Bridge. There had been, too, a hesitation in his explanation of his needs. His studio and house so far as she could see, were already quite ample for his purposes. If he intended to travel. . . . But he had said nothing about that. Of course it was none of Tommy's business what he wanted to use his money for and, having in mind her previous adventure

in meddling with his affairs, she did not ask any questions. But her curiosity was unabated. Could it be possible that Josie Brant's predicament had something to do with his sudden decision to make use of all his available income?

They parted at the hotel, after Tommy had talked with Mr. Kingsley at the Trust Company, arranging for an appointment to meet him in the afternoon.

3

Tommy looked at her wrist watch. It was nearly one o'clock. She had given up all her engagements for the morning, risen early and gone with Peter to Mr. Kingsley's office at the Trust Company at half past nine. John Kingsley was a shrewd young fellow, already one of the vice presidents of the company, and thoroughly capable of attending carefully to the business that Tommy had entrusted to him. He had, in matters of the financial sort, a kind of oracular apprehension that was, to Tommy, little less than marvelous. His long thin fingers seemed to have at their sentient ends an intimate touch with all matters that had to do with the business of the city. If there was a question he could not answer he would touch one of a row of buttons upon his desk and a person would appear with a paper or a volume which contained the needed information. He was, either personally or vicariously, omniscient. On the previous afternoon, after Peter had left her apartment, Tommy had taken a taxi to his office and laid Peter's case before him, for it was, she believed, one that needed at once, a strong, guiding impulse. Mr. Kingsley had immediately

begun playing upon the buttons on his desk and various persons had appeared, all of whom, after necessary intervals of absence, had made complete and confidential reports upon the financial and personal reputations of Joseph Randle and John Henry Dawson. This information had been disquieting and was briefly as follows:

“Joseph Randle, President of the Progressive Utilities Corporation, manufacturers of labor-saving devices; no dividends in five years; suit won, judgment for four thousand dollars still unpaid. Notes protested June third, 1921, and March sixth, 1922. Personal financial standing—indifferent.

“John Henry Dawson, attorney-at-law. Practice—general. Counsel for a western oil company, indicted for fraud in stock selling operations. Speculator in uptown apartment buildings. Associated with Aloysius Barclay, Joseph Randle and others in Yellow Hill Farms Company, a suburban development, White Plains, New York. Supposed to be in difficulties because of high cost of labor and materials.”

Tommy had told Peter nothing of these disclosures by Mr. Kingsley, hoping that, after all, the reports by financial agencies might be erroneous or exaggerated or that Peter's fortunes, in spite of them, might not really have been involved. But Mr. Kingsley, with the frankness and vigor that were his characteristics, had come straight to the point, indicating that, to all appearances, at least, Peter's affairs were not in good hands but that he was ready to do what he could to get at the truth of the matter. Peter had at first seemed a little querulous and even disposed to dispute the statements, but had departed

at last, in a taxi, for Dawson's office with John Kingsley, wearing a resolute if slightly bewildered air.

Tommy had gone out to do some shopping, returning to the Trust Company at half past eleven, where she still waited in growing inquietude the results of Mr. Kingsley's mission. At one o'clock they came in, Kingsley flushed and bright-eyed as from a battle. Peter slightly pallid under his tan, frowning, but composed.

Kingsley hung up his hat and closed the door carefully.

"Well—?" asked Tommy.

Kingsley shook his head and sat.

"It's all pretty bad," he muttered. "Just about as bad as it could be." He looked at Peter as though including him in his audience. "I don't know yet just how much can be saved from the wreck, or how far (if that is Mr. Peter Randle's intention) we can proceed against them in a criminal action. To put the matter in plain English, under the power of attorney given by Mr. Randle, this man Dawson had authority to make any use he chose of the funds entrusted to him, provided they were in Mr. Randle's interest and a proper income from the investments was paid to him. Mr. Joseph Randle, it seems, was a party to all of Dawson's transactions." Mr. Kingsley touched a button and a man appeared instantly.

"Yellow Hill Farms, Westchester, get me all you can on it, Mr. Waters."

Mr. Waters disappeared into some inner chamber of cognoscence.

"Oh, Peter," said Tommy, earnestly, "I'm so sorry!"

"My fault," Peter said, calmly. "I've always been a fool about business. But I never thought that Joe Randle. . . ." His phrase dwindled into a murmur.

"Tell me, Mr. Kingsley, just what happened."

"They weren't expecting me, of course. Mr. Randle introduced me as a friend who knew something about business and had offered to help him out. They were suspicious at once and attempted camouflage. But Mr. Randle was forceful, asserting his rights to revoke his power of attorney at will. Not until then, did they consent to my taking a part in the conference. They had prepared for Mr. Randle a sort of report of their operations during the past three years. It was arranged for the eyes of one unfamiliar with balance sheets and was 'cooked up' for the occasion. It was quite obvious in a moment that these men, one of them a relative, had been methodically using Mr. Peter Randle's capital for their own enterprises, taking the most reckless chances in every kind of venture that promised a hope of redeeming the losses that their previous uses of his money had entailed. They were unsuccessful. Mr. Joseph Randle's holdings in the manufacturing company have a small value, how much, of course, I don't know. Dawson's holdings in uptown real estate are in his own name. The Yellow Hill Farms—" He read from a slip of paper that Mr. Waters had silently handed in— " 'Yellow Hill Farms Company—a speculative real estate operation on a large scale, two miles from White Plains station. Estate of Samuel Oakley, deceased, equity exchanged for twenty thousand cash, subject to large mortgage. Sidewalks and roads built; sewers; six houses in course of erection; work stopped for lack of funds.' A very small equity there, too, you see. I was hoping that this proposition was in better shape." He broke off with a scowl at the paper which he tossed upon his desk. "Well, there you have it, Miss Keith. A

hopeless affair beginning with a betrayal of confidence by a trusted relative and ending in—God knows what.”

Peter had sat silent through Mr. Kingsley’s remarks, like one suffering a reproof. Most of the time he stared out of the window at the buildings opposite as though in deep thought.

“I’m sure,” he said now, “that I’m under great obligations to Mr. Kingsley—and to you—ah—Tommy. I have a feeling that I—I ought to have taken Cousin Joe by the throat and choked him a little—but he looked so frightened and so guilty—that I couldn’t.”

Kingsley smiled. “I don’t think Mr. Dawson is likely to forget you, though, Mr. Randle,” he said, dryly.

“Peter!” said Tommy, “what did you do?”

“Nothing—nothing at all—”

“Mr. Kingsley—!” she asked, appealingly.

Kingsley glanced at Peter and smiled as he explained. “In the later stages of our conference, Mr. Dawson, driven to desperation, made the mistake of shaking his fist in Mr. Randle’s face. I don’t know whether his wrist is broken or not.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter said, softly, “but he was most annoying.”

“Well, *rather*!” Tommy gasped.

“And what’s to be done now?”

“That, of course is up to Mr. Randle. I assume that he wants me to take charge of his affairs and to take the necessary legal steps to put him into possession of any securities or assets in the hands of these men.”

Peter nodded.

“Very well. I think Dawson is frightened. By every rule of ethics and morals he has made a criminal misuse of

funds, but whether he will escape criminal charges is something that our legal department must determine. He is coming here to-morrow and will, I think, make a full accounting of all valuable securities still in his hands. Perhaps we shall save something considerable for you, Mr. Randle. Can you come in conveniently—say—the day after to-morrow at ten?”

Tommy rose, for she knew from his tone that the interview was concluded. Peter took up his hat.

“And now,” said Tommy, when they were outside, “you’re to come up to my apartment for lunch.”

“Thanks,” said Peter, and obediently hailed a taxi.

4

It will have been perceived by these incidents that Tommy Keith found herself willing to depart from the round of her daily habit in showing a real friendship for Peter Randle. Whether these kindly feelings were actuated by a sentimental interest such as Lola Oliver had attributed to her, or were merely the result of natural impulses of sympathy and comprehension toward one who had done her a curiously intimate service, Tommy could not possibly have told. She had, of course, rejected Lola’s suggestion with the scorn that it had deserved, a scorn quite in keeping with Tommy’s reputation as a practiced woman of the world who could not be expected to be susceptible to the Arcadian simplicities of such a creature as Peter. All the adjectives relating to affection or love are taboo in the younger generation as belonging to the much despised Victorians and of them, “sentimental” is perhaps the most abhorrent. In Lola’s comment that insipid adjective had been implied rather than spoken, but

the remark had made Tommy give some thought to her attitude of mind toward Peter. And she admitted to herself, at last, that Peter Randle was the only man, for instance, with whom she could speak without fear of some self-conscious misinterpretation of her remarks. To Peter she could speak naturally as a child would speak—as Peter spoke, and there was a charm to Tommy in feeling that here was one person at least who had no ulterior purpose in cultivating her acquaintance. She had been the prey of fortune hunters since she was eighteen, and, particularly since the affair with Jack Salazar, which had considerably lowered her in self-esteem, had learned to mistrust her own judgment. It had always been an unpleasant experience to realize that she was courted for what she had rather than for what she was. Peter Randle had not sought her until she had sought him and then only with the groping gesture of a blind man searching for a way through a difficulty. She liked the thought of Peter's coming to her when he might have gone to Fred Wingate. She liked the idea of somebody relying upon her for something. It was a new sensation to one accustomed always to rely on somebody else. The heart of the most hardened woman of the world is most quickly touched by an act of simple dependence and Peter had excited both Tommy's sympathy and comprehension. She was quite sure that she understood him as few of his friends did, and still hoped perhaps that in being of actual service to him in this last, as in other matters, she might succeed in guiding him where others had failed.

The events of the morning by their disastrous revelations of his financial misfortunes had diverted her from yesterday's curiosity. For now, whatever Peter's plans

had been, the discoveries of Mr. Kingsley must have effectually destroyed them. It was all too distressing for words.

She ordered luncheon and they went up to her apartment where the table was spread in Tommy's dressing room, an informality enjoyed only by her most intimate friends—with one exception, all feminine. It had been a trying morning and so Tommy had ordered well.

Peter ate with a ruminative air and when luncheon was finished asked if he might smoke his pipe. So Tommy brought out her cigarettes. When the dishes were cleared away a new moment of confidences seemed suddenly to arrive. The tobacco dispelled the other fogs that had clouded Peter's thoughts.

"I suppose I'd better be figuring on the worst," he said at last. "Things don't look any too good, do they?"

"It's a little too early to say," said Tommy, thoughtfully. And then after a pause, "I thought I'd like you to know, Peter, that if there's any other way I can help, I wish you'd let me—to tide you over the difficulty—money, I mean—" she finished, definitely. "You know I've got a lot more than I spend. It wouldn't mean anything to me—"

He stared at her wide-eyed as she went on. Then broke in quickly, almost violently.

"That's very kind of you. But I wouldn't take money from you—not from anybody. I'm thankful for your offer just the same, but I didn't come to you for that sort of help, Tommy."

"I know you didn't. But I just thought there might be a time between now and when you can realize on what you have, when you might need a few thousands—"

"Please! Please!" he protested, rising and walking to the window, moving like some disconsolate god in a cloud of his own creation. "If I've lost my money I've lost it and that's all there is about it. I'm up against it, and I'm not going to victimize my friends, just because I've been fool enough to let a fortune slip between my fingers. I'll get along all right. I guess I've had things too easy all my life. Maybe this shock will wake me up. I might have been a better painter, maybe, if I'd just *had* to make good." Then added with a queer smile, "I guess I'll have to, *now*, all right."

"But things mayn't be as bad as they look. You still might have enough to give you the old income."

He turned in from the window and sat again.

"No. I've been short-sighted enough in the past. But I'm wide awake now. There isn't going to be much left of what belonged to me when they sift out the assets. Oh, I'll get something, I suppose—enough to keep going for a while—but it won't last long."

"But what will you do?"

"I—I'm going to make good," he stammered in a kind of fury at his deficiencies. "I know I've got some fine pictures in me, if I can only make them come out. They've just got to come out. I've got to succeed. Other men do. Frear, for instance. He makes a lot of money. I don't want a lot of money—just enough to get along on. I don't want to paint like Frear, though—something else." He twisted toward her suddenly. "You saw some of the things I've done, Tommy—the one of the river in the afternoon light—didn't you think that was good? I mean, don't you think that's good enough to sell?"

His eagerness was almost childlike. She didn't know

anything about paintings, but she remembered the one he spoke about, though she had seen it in a moment of disillusionment. She was quite sincere in her reply.

"Yes, Peter. It was good. Almost anybody would like to buy it."

The broad optimism was too much even for Peter who smiled at the kindness of her intention.

"No, not anybody. But some fellow who likes it and doesn't care anything about names. I don't know. There might be somebody like that around somewhere."

"Of course. But you've got to make yourself known."

"Yes. I haven't tried to do that. I wasn't ready. So many fellows go sending to the exhibitions before they've got anything to show. There are a lot of catch words around the studios. One of 'em is that there's something wrong with the work of a young man who gets too popular. Maybe I've banked too much on it. But I haven't really tried to sell anything yet—even to put anything with the dealers."

"It's the right thing to do, of course. You can't tell," she said, smiling, "you might be just wrong enough to get popular at once."

"Well, I'll have to see about that," he said, thoughtfully.

There was a silence. He was taking his misfortunes, she thought, with a philosophy she couldn't have hoped to equal. There was in his eyes a gleam of resolution that she had not seen in them before. It was as though the mist that befogs the eyes of the dreamer had suddenly rolled away, leaving him face to face with life as it really was. But what he saw did not deter him. Some passive quality had departed from him, some new intentness taken its

place. The time for his dreaming was past and he seemed to realize it. He settled deeper into his chair as though by contracting his body he might better concentrate the forces of his mind upon his problem.

"I wouldn't mind so much about myself," he was muttering, "if it wasn't for other responsibilities. . . ."

Tommy was alert at once. But it was just a fragment of his thought incompleted.

"Other responsibilities?" she asked, not too eagerly.

He frowned at his extinguished pipe.

"Yes," he echoed, "other responsibilities. I didn't know. . . ."

He paused again, his thoughts beyond her.

"You didn't know what, Peter?"

"Oh—that this thing was going to happen."

"Naturally you didn't."

He halted again and Tommy assumed the air of indifference that she found a most effective stimulant to confidences. His brows tangled and he straightened in his chair with a jerk.

"I guess I'd better tell you, Tommy. I haven't told anybody else. It's about—Josie."

He noticed the slight movement of Tommy's head away from him. "You don't like Josie," he went on quickly. "I—I'm sorry things happened the way they did. I wish you *could* like her—be a little kinder to her in your thoughts—"

"Why, Peter, I—" she stared at him, uncomprehending.

"She needs friendship, pity—all that anybody can give her." And then taking heart from Tommy's silence, he went on: "She was so misused, I couldn't help being sorry for her. I'd never known anything about what a

woman of her sort—a woman in her position suffered. It doesn't matter much to me what she did. I've just got a queer point of view about some things."

He lowered his voice and seemed to be tracing with his glance the figures in the rug.

"Women have always seemed to me to have a touch of divinity about them," he went on, "they hold the great mystery of life. But they're so frail, so helpless for this responsibility. So weak if they love greatly. There's a kind of glory in a woman who gives all that she is to the man she loves. Some women are wiser than others—some, more fortunate in the men they choose. Most men who have the capacity to make women love them are not the worthy kind. They are too brilliant to wear. I—I hope you know what I mean—"

Was he thinking of Tommy and Jack Salazar? Apparently not, but none the less the remarks cut deep.

"Yes. I—I do," she murmured.

"Well, I—I was sorry for Josie. She never had any chance—from the first. She was weak, vain, and easily led. She came into my house because of an accidental meeting. I thought I could help her. I *have* helped her, I think. Wasn't it right for me to do what I could to try and make her self-respecting again after what had happened? Wasn't it? People seemed to think that I was doing something culpable to the community and to myself. The women of the neighborhood were affronted. Why? Would they have taken this woman in if I hadn't? I don't know. I'm afraid not. But I *did* take her in and a sense of my duty grew as I saw how she needed me. She was not just Josie Brant. She was typical of all women who give their affections where they are not deserved. And so—" he

gasped, "I defied the conventions of a small town and took care of her. She's going to need more care—soon. I'm committed to her. That's why I say this thing that has happened to me is so disturbing. I'm not afraid of getting along for myself—somehow. But the loss of this money is going to make things difficult."

Tommy turned toward him. "I don't understand, Peter," she said, her incredulity growing.

Peter got up and paced the floor slowly. "I think you ought to know, I think I want you to know, Tommy. You didn't like Josie. It wasn't quite natural, I suppose, that you should. But I wonder if you couldn't try to think of her more gently, more kindly—"

"But why?" she urged. "What possible difference can my opinions mean to her one way or the other?"

"Because it's I who want your good opinions for her—and for myself. And because I oughtn't to accept your friendship unless you give it to her, too."

"I can't understand."

"Well, then, I'll tell you. Nobody in Red Bridge knows. Josie and I were married in Philadelphia last week."

Experience had taught Tommy many things. She was, as has been indicated, a creature inured to astonishments in the deficiencies of her friends. But this statement of Peter's was so incredible that she merely stared at him as though she thought he had suddenly been deprived of his senses. Not yet could she understand the mental processes which could have made such a thing possible.

"You—you *married* her!" she gasped in a kind of horror.

"Yes—I did," he muttered, as though abashed by the challenge in her tone.

"Good God, Peter! But why? *Why?*"

"It was the only thing to do."

"But you don't love this woman—you *can't*."

"I was very, very sorry for her."

Tommy rose and walked to the window, turning in toward him abruptly.

"But that's no reason for marrying a woman—not a woman like—"

And then as though suddenly realizing that she was about to describe Peter's wife, she stopped with a gasp and to Peter's amazement, burst into raucous and inelegant laughter. That laughter hurt him. At the moment she intended it to hurt, for it just missed being derisive. He could not know, of course, that Tommy had been taken off her guard and that her laughter covered an effort to gather her reasoning faculties together for a further consideration of the real significance of Peter's latest and most magnificent folly. He was "very, very sorry for her." Was that all? He did not love this woman—he couldn't—no man of Peter's sort could have loved a woman like Josie Brant—not to marry her! A vision of the woman's smug, shrewd, common little face came to Tommy like a blow. And her stubby fingers. A sacrifice! And to what end? Peter did not know that he had given his friend Tommy a more real distress than she had ever known. She had wanted so much to help him as he had helped her. She cared for him that much. She had done everything that she could to show him. . . . And so she laughed. There seemed to be nothing else to do.

"I don't see—what—there is to laugh about—" she heard him saying.

She turned to the window again.

"No—there—there isn't. I—I don't know why I did. The—the whole thing seemed so—so terribly unusual, that's all."

He stared at her straight modish back. She said no more. A wall had risen between them.

"I just thought I—I'd tell you. You're not in sympathy with what I've done. I'm sorry. I hoped you might understand."

She made no reply. There came to him no glimmering of what her attitude might mean. Nothing except the bare fact that she was entirely intolerant of him and that he had perhaps lost her friendship. He couldn't bear to lose that because he knew that it already meant much to him.

"Tommy," he said, uneasily, "I—I want to thank you for what you've done for me—"

"It's nothing."

"And I—I hope—you'll let me count on you as a friend."

"You've made that difficult."

"Oh, I—" Her meaning came to him slowly. "Oh, yes, I see."

"But of course Mr. Kingsley can be relied on." She turned into the room and came toward him, her eyes bright with the out of doors. "But I do wish you all the luck in the world."

"Oh—thanks. Good-by—ah—Tommy."

"Good-by, Peter."

And he went out, Tommy staring after him.

CHAPTER X

NEW PROSPECTS

1

THROUGH all of Peter's difficulties, Frederick Wingate had sat, like a god upon a mountain, awaiting the renewal of Peter's confidences; ready with his friendship as he had told Jane Garrett, when all of Peter's other friends had failed him. It had been Wingate's private belief that Peter, having defied all precedent and satisfied his obstinate convictions, would some day be climbing Wingate's hill for advice as to the final disposition to be made of the woman of many misfortunes. And so, when a week after his return from New York Peter suddenly appeared in the door of the big studio, Wingate decided that it was merely the expected that had happened. He intended to respect Josie's position if possible, for Peter's sake and to offer his friendly counsel with an eye to Peter's future and his release from further responsibilities.

It was therefore with a sense of the inefficacy of human judgment that he listened while Peter, after an awkward preamble, told of his marriage to Josie Brant. It was merely a statement of fact, without ornament or explanation, and Wingate sat in a chair, his jaw falling and eyes staring, in a momentary state of complete mental vacuity.

He gasped at last something that sounded like, "Well, I'm damned!" and then, the necessity for some further

vent for his emotions being necessary, he rose and walked rapidly to and fro, repeating his phrase more distinctly. These remarks were not addressed to Peter though their effect achieved this purpose.

Peter chose to disregard them.

"I thought I'd tell you, Wingate," he said, coolly filling his pipe, "you know about Josie's troubles. This marriage straightens things out, in a way—"

"Oh, yes, so it does," assented the bewildered Wingate.

"You know you said people down here would talk. Well, they did. Not that it mattered much to me. But they can't talk any more now. It's all fixed."

"Oh, yes, of course, all fixed," gasped Wingate. "Have you—" He managed with an effort to achieve this much in the way of a new thought. "Have you told anybody else in Red Bridge?"

"No," said Peter, striking a match, "I haven't. I—ah—thought maybe you wouldn't mind spreading the information—ah, gently—say, at the store or down at the hotel."

Wingate couldn't help grinning at Peter's ideas of spreading the information "gently," through the raucous agency of Mr. Sam Small.

"Well, Peter," he muttered, "if that's what you want, I suppose it might be managed."

"Ah—thanks, Wingate," said Peter.

There were a number of questions that Wingate would have liked to ask, but his usual frankness seemed to be abashed before the stupendous folly of Peter's sacrifice. And if Peter expected any comment upon his news, he was prepared to forestall it by speaking at once about the picture on Wingate's easel. He was, as Wingate could

see, completely self-possessed and confident of Wingate's magnanimity. There was, indeed, nothing that Wingate could say, unless he made Peter both angry and unhappy. It was too late for objurgation—even for irony. Instead, he summoned a grudging impulse of generosity.

"Well, if you want to see visitors, Mary and I would like very much to call."

"Mary! Ah—oh, yes, of course. Delighted! There are one or two things I've done I'd like you to see." Peter moved a hand with the sawing motion that sometimes swerved as a stimulus to speech. "I've—ah—decided, Wingate, to put my stuff—some of it, that is—on the market."

"That's all right," Wingate replied, heartily. "Maybe I can help you." But he wondered at this sudden decision, which was contrary to Peter's views, previously announced.

"I've got to make a start sometime, and I thought I might begin in a small way. I suppose," he added, quietly, "that I'll be needing more money after a while."

Wingate, who knew Peter's history and his possible resources, found himself asking abruptly:

"But of course you'll have plenty of money for all your needs, even now—"

"That's just it, Wingate. I won't. Things have happened recently—I've lost a lot of money. Idiotic sort of thing. My fault for trusting in people—very unfortunate—ah—especially at this time."

Wingate sank into a chair. "Do explain, Peter."

And so after a moment of deliberation in which Peter decided that it would be more flattering to Wingate if he learned the facts first hand instead of from Tommy, Peter

told of all that he had discovered with Tommy Keith's assistance in New York as to the state of his fortunes. The seriousness of his position was at once apparent to Wingate, who exploded with a round oath as Peter finished.

"And do you mean that they've stolen it all?"

"Almost all," said Peter, calmly. "I had a letter from the Trust Company this morning. There'll probably be about five thousand left—maybe six. So you see, I've got to get busy—"

"Well, what are you going to do about those damned rascals? You're not going to spare them?"

Peter smiled fatuously. "I don't suppose I could get four hundred thousand dollars' worth of fun out of smashing their heads. Besides—Dawson has skipped—leaving Cousin Joe Randle to bear the brunt of things—"

"I'd have them both in the penitentiary—!"

"But how would that help *me*? And Cousin Joe has a wife and a couple of kids. She was always a very nice sort of a girl."

"H—m. You'll be hard up, then?"

"Oh, no. Not for a while," said Peter, cheerfully. "They've found some cash that they can get for me almost at once. Dawson was sending my checks out of that, to keep me satisfied."

After the first shock of Peter's news, Wingate paced the floor more calmly.

"Well, I'll see Lablache about you. He's the best dealer for your sort of stuff. He'll put stiff prices on and talk you up as a 'discovery.' You'll have to give him thirty-three and one-third per cent of what he gets, but that won't matter if the price is big enough. You've got

to make the right sort of a start. Big talk and a lot of 'side.' That's the way they work things." He grinned. "Do you think you could put on 'side,' Peter?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders, rather hopelessly. "I don't know. I'm afraid not. I don't think very much of my stuff—that is, not yet," he added.

"But you've got to think a lot of your stuff, if you want other people to. I've given you some pretty brutal criticisms. That was because I wanted to help you. That was professional. But some of your work is a long sight better than that of other fellows who are 'getting away with it.' "

"Oh, thanks," said Peter, gratefully. "I didn't know."

"You've got something of your own—the poetry, I mean. That's your line—and clean quiet color. We'll look your stuff over when I come down. Then we'll pick out half a dozen for Lablache."

"That's very kind," said Peter, rising. "And you'll come soon?"

"Yes, Peter—some afternoon, say to-morrow if the light is good."

2

Peter went down the hill with a light heart. He needed the sort of encouragement that Wingate had given him to strengthen his belief in himself. Since his return from New York he had gone to work with a new and resolute vision. The loss of his fortune had given him a greater shock than had been apparent to Tommy Keith or Mr. John Kingsley. He seemed to see things with a rather brutal distinctness—the world that had treated him too kindly had suddenly turned traitor, exhibiting sordid facts

that Peter had always relegated into his background. There seemed to be no way of avoiding them now, for there they were, blocking the primrose way into the future with their solid bulk. Peter liked to work, but he liked to work dreamily. There was to be no more dreaming now. And the ill fortune that had deprived him of his material resources had set before him a mirror which presented to him from almost every angle the deficiencies of temperament that had been the cause of his undoing.

The encouragement of Frederick Wingate had been just what he needed at this moment. The sense of his obligations had for a week been rather overwhelming. He had said nothing to Josie about his misfortunes but he felt that their revelation could not be long delayed. Since their marriage, she had shown him every mark of regard, exhibiting a childish interest in his welfare that seemed to Peter very pathetic and touching. It was the only way in which she could show her gratitude for his astonishing proposal and their subsequent marriage. For these, she must surely know, were the result of his pity for her distressing situation and not born of anything more than a generous affection for one who had become dependent on him. He had not told her that he loved her, except in the necessary phrases of the marriage service, and she had accepted the situation with a rather obvious humility. Nothing was changed in their lives, apparently.

Since Peter's return from New York he had spent all of his daylight hours in the studio or out of doors and their evenings by the lamp were commonplace enough. She knew nothing of his art and their discussions had to do with the news of the day and with Josie's approaching departure for Philadelphia. He was very sorry for her and

treated her with every mark of consideration. During the past week there had been slight recurrences of her attacks of nerves when she had been disturbed over trifles, but he had attributed them to her condition, and after fits of weeping, she had yielded to his kindness and apologized for her behavior.

But he realized that with marriage, the nature of his obligation to her had changed. In a moment of deep compassion he had asked her to marry him, not counting the cost, only aware of the pathos of her weakness and dependence. Her need of him had been in that moment more important than any other consideration. He had never been in love, and the thought of ever being in love with a woman was farthest from his mind. He had been a little shocked as he repeated them, at the unalterable character of the vows that he made before the Philadelphia magistrate, but he had gone through the thing soberly, with the assurance of one definitely pledged to an act of justice and humanity. He was just giving Josie and Josie's baby a name. Why shouldn't he? It was his name to give if he liked. He had no use for it. He had rather that Josie had it than any one else.

It was the sense of these new obligations, now more definitely appreciated, that made the confession of his financial losses to Josie seem difficult. He had already learned, perhaps, a respect for the tyranny of her tears. There was, too, a sense of his failure at an important moment. Of course, he had given her in all good faith his good name and all that he possessed, but it was not Josie's fault that his present resources were not what he had supposed them to be. There was every reason to believe that before the year was gone, money would be scarce. There was a

mortgage on the island, and because of the winter floods, this land was not considered to be a valuable piece of property. But Peter loved the place and the thought of being obliged to sell it or worse yet to have it sold over his head, was most distressing.

And so, as Peter crossed the bridge over the canal and went down the private lane, he turned over in his mind his approach to this unpleasant subject. Josie was lying on the couch in the studio reading when he came in, thus signifying her appreciation of the change in their relationship. Full of his project, he got out the canvases he intended to show Wingate, put them around the room in favorable lights, and then sank into his Windsor chair and examined them attentively.

"I've been up to Wingate's," he said. "He's going over with me to take some of these things to Lablache—he's the dealer, you know, very successful—gets big prices, even for the work of the new men. I thought these—" and he indicated his work, "were the ones I'd begin with. Do you like them, Josie?"

"Yes, they're very pretty," said Josie.

Peter straightened and glanced at her. Prettiness was the one quality that Peter abominated in landscapes. Frear's landscapes were "pretty."

"Oh—pretty—ah—I hoped. . . ." He subsided abruptly, aware that Josie would not understand.

"Wingate's going to help you?" said Josie, calmly. "Well it's about time he did something, instead of coming here and finding fault with everything you paint."

Her opinion, so freely expressed for the first time gave Peter a slight sense of intrusion. But he only smiled.

"You don't understand. The criticism of one painter

by another must be honest. It wouldn't help me much if he kept telling me how good I was."

"Don't you worry," she said with a sniff. "He'll never do that. He's too stuck on himself. He thinks he's about the finest artist in the world."

"Well, he *is* pretty fine, Josie. Anybody who knows anything about modern painting will tell you that." He got up, brought out another canvas and examined it at arm's length. "You don't like Wingate, Josie. Why not?"

"I don't know. He's too smart, I guess. He hasn't been any too polite to me."

"Oh, I think you're mistaken. He's frank, honest, maybe a little too honest sometimes, but I've never known him to be impolite to any one. He and Mary are coming down here to call—to-morrow maybe."

Josie started up. "To call—on *me*! Why? I don't want to see them."

Peter's brows tangled suddenly. "I think," he said, distinctly, "that it's very nice of them."

"Oh, do you! Well, is it any nicer now than it would of been two months ago?"

Peter didn't like her tone or the intent of her remark, which seemed unnecessarily aggressive.

"You'll have to admit," he said, firmly, "that conditions have changed."

"Oh, I don't care," she muttered. "These small-town people give me a pain."

"I hope at least that you'll be civil to them," Peter concluded.

How much of Josie's captious mood could be attributed to her prejudices, how much to her actual physical condi-

tion, Peter had no way of knowing, so he gave her sex the benefit of the doubt, pottering around the studio and stretching a new canvas for the work he was planning to do in the morning. He had discovered that by politely ignoring Josie for a while he could usually bring her to some sort of reasonable terms. It was, therefore, in a more pleasing tone that she next addressed him.

"It's very nice that you're going to sell those pictures in New York. I suppose you'll be going over there often."

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"Well, if New York is the place you're going to sell them, why wouldn't it be better to live there? It would save a lot of coming and going, wouldn't it?"

He smiled. "But I can't paint the Delaware Valley in New York."

"Well, why not paint people? I've got a girl friend that poses for an artist—illustrating for the magazines, and he makes lots of money."

"But I'm not a figure painter, you see. I'm a landscape painter. I can't do anything else, whether I wanted to or not."

"Oh," she said, in disappointment. "I've been thinking that after I came out of the hospital you might like to go to New York to live."

He pulled on his canvas stretcher and drove a tack.

"No, I wouldn't, Josie," he said, slowly. "I've got to stay here." After a moment of deliberation he put the canvas aside and sat in the chair beside her. "Something has happened that I've got to tell you about," he said. "It's something that may make things a little—ah—difficult for a while."

She leaned forward, now watching his face intently.

"I've been wondering whether I'd better tell you or not. But now that you're married to me whatever happens to me, happens to you too, doesn't it?"

"What is it you're talking about, Peter?"

"Well, I suppose you knew in a general way that I had money—a good deal of it—or I wouldn't have been living here on my income, just studying, and not trying to sell anything the way the other artists are doing?"

"Yes, you never made any secret of it, did you?"

"No. And when I married you I thought I was sure of having enough money to give you anything in reason, try to make you happy, and go on living here at Red Bridge painting the things I wanted to paint until I was ready to go out for a reputation, for prizes and for money. Well, things aren't going to be exactly as they were with me. I mean, I've got to work pretty hard now to keep things going."

"You mean," she said with a distinctness that seemed the very token of a distressing intuition, "that you've lost all your money?"

"Well—ah—yes, since you put it that way—almost all of it." And he told her briefly of the betrayal of his confidence, and of the letter that he had just received telling him of the full extent of the disaster. She heard him through until the end, making no interruptions or comments, leaning forward, her thin hands clasped before her, her gaze, wide with perturbation, fixed upon his rather somber profile. "I'm sorry I couldn't have told you all this—ah—before we were married. It might have given you the chance to change your mind about things. But I didn't know anything about it until I went to New York and I didn't want to tell you until I was sure just how

bad things were. I know now. I've got enough to see things through for a while. I mean—the hospital, nurses and everything—you needn't worry about that—but we'll have to go carefully—until I manage to make some sales."

"My God!" she gasped at last, "that's awful."

"It is awful. I'm sorry. I never dreamed—"

"But there must be some way of getting it back. How could you let a couple of crooks—? Why, there's a law for people like that."

Peter explained, as he had explained to Wingate, the legal impediments to restitution. "I've got the case in the hands of good people. They'll do all they can. But I don't want you to hope I'll get anything much—just a few thousands. And I thought you ought to know."

"My God!" repeated Josie. "How did you ever let a couple of crooks get into you like that?"

"Well, I guess— Oh, what's the use? It's done now. I was too easy—a fool, if you like. But calling myself names isn't going to make things better." He got up and strode the length of the room moving his hands with their sawing motion up and down. "We're going to get along some way. I'm going to make good, Josie. Don't you worry. It's all right. This fellow Lablache knows his business. He sells a lot of stuff for fellows that can't paint as well as I do. He puts on a lot of 'side'—gray velvet backgrounds, special lights, young fellows in spats wandering around and bowing to millionaires. That's the way it's done. Nothing under a thousand—most of the big men, up in five figures."

"Do you mean," asked Josie with an interest that was

now entirely respectful, "that you can get a thousand dollars apiece for those things?"

"Maybe."

"Well, I declare! That's wonderful! You can almost do one of them in an afternoon—two or three afternoons anyhow—say two a week. Why that's a hundred thousand a year, isn't it?"

Peter grinned. She had always told him that she had a talent for figures.

"Well," he said, "I don't believe I'm apt to sell as many as that."

"Well," she replied, with cheerful resignation, "even fifty thousand wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

Peter admitted that it wouldn't.

So the evening, which threatened domestic storms, passed comfortably enough. Peter knew from the experiences of the other members of the artist colony that there might be many disappointments in store for him, many long periods of waiting before any one of his canvases might be sold. It was a matter of luck, a matter of good management. He thought that he could confidently entrust the methods to Lablache. Peter was, upon the whole, more cheerful when he went to bed than he had been since the loss of his fortune.

3

By the time Josie was ready to go to the hospital in Philadelphia, Peter was in a very hopeful frame of mind about his professional prospects. Frames had been ordered by letter, and when Peter and Wingate had visited Lablache they were shown every civility and Peter was

given marks of approval by the young men in spats and by Mr. Lablache himself, who rubbed his hands appreciatively and said that he was quite sure that something could be done with Mr. Randle's work—quite sure. The Delaware River painters were very successful. There was no reason to doubt that in time they might be as famous as the Barbizon School. But after all it was of course a matter of the individual viewpoint and technique. A man must have something of his own—a method, a cachet—to make his work desired. There was something to this work of Mr. Randle's. He was delighted that Mr. Wingate had offered him the privilege, etc. There were clients of the firm that were looking for small paintings like these. The price ought not to be too high—twelve hundred, at most. Would Mr. Randle be content with that?

Peter had been very much pleased and returned to Red Ridge with every hope that the problem of his future was solved. He had not seen Tommy Keith, though the Lablache place was on Fifth Avenue not far from the Ritz. The memory of his last parting from Tommy had given him the impression that their pleasant relationship was no longer to continue on exactly the same terms. And so after thanking his friend Wingate, to whom he entrusted greetings to Lola and Tommy, Peter had returned alone to Red Bridge.

Peter had been pleased, too, at the conciliatory attitude that Josie had shown toward his friends when they had called. She had, it seemed, none of the natural embarrassment of her situation and could, when she chose, be very pleasant to visitors. Wingate had been civil and Mary, who was always nice to everybody, very charming. Jane Garrett had driven down, too, one evening, with her

talented husband, thus doing a duty to Peter and setting an example for the artists' wives of the community. It had all been very satisfactory. And now that Josie was comfortably settled in the hospital, Peter went back to his painting with a new sort of joy the like of which he had never known. The summer was in the last days of August with the haze and heat, but he worked steadily, developing some plans that he had made, working usually in the early morning and late afternoon for the effects that he wanted. In three weeks he produced five pictures; one of them was good, but three were very, very bad. He was not, obviously, going to keep pace with the schedule that Josie had inspired.

Still, he was satisfied with one of his canvases, and Wingate, who had resumed his old habit of stopping at the island for a smoke and a chat, was very generous in his criticism of one of the others. Wingate also reported that he had seen Tommy Keith and that she had sent him messages of good will.

And then, very suddenly, Peter was summoned to Philadelphia upon a sad errand. For Josie's baby died and for several days it was thought that Josie would also die. Excluded from the sick room Peter sat in the corridors of the hospital or wandered the streets of Philadelphia in a very unhappy state of mind. In those few days he did a lot of thinking. He knew that he did not love Josie with the passion that one is supposed to cherish toward a wife. He had never been in love and was therefore somewhat at a loss as to what that passion or sentiment was really like. But the pity that he had had for her from the beginning had ripened into a sort of devotion that was, he thought, a passable imitation of the real thing. In marrying her he

had done what people doubtless thought was extraordinary, but his own attitude of mind toward his marriage had been and continued to be completely abstract. Except for the brief moments of the ceremony which had been unpleasantly personal, he had looked upon his relationship to Josie as a sort of consecrated fellowship of benevolence and pity, born in a moment of inspiration, in an hour of compassion. And the train of misfortunes that had followed, now culminating in her grave illness and possible death, had increased his sense of responsibility and given his pity some of the elements of love itself. There were many things about Josie's personality that had annoyed him, especially since their marriage, for her point of view on life and his were necessarily divergent, but all of these things were forgotten in this moment of her danger. He gave the dead baby, the fruit of Josie's sin, a Christian burial and resumed his wanderings about the city.

At the end of a week, Josie showed signs of improvement and the week following he was admitted to her room. She gave him a wan smile and he kissed her. She was very pale; and suffering had given her an ethereal quality as though the grosser elements of the material flesh had been refined and purified. Her voice was faint with weakness but from their shadows her eyes beamed on him softly, to Peter, eyes that had peered over the edge of eternity and now looked at him with something of infinity in them still. It was a fine moment to Peter—one of the finest that he had ever known, and in it he made new vows to save Josie from the errors of her early environment and restore her to a life of usefulness and contentment.

CHAPTER XI

THE ROUGH GRAIN

1

PETER sold a picture. It was the one of late afternoon looking down the river and the price was a thousand dollars. This was the great news that he brought to Philadelphia when he came to the hospital to take Josie back to Red Bridge. Her comment was disappointing to Peter. "Only *one* picture? I thought by this time you would have sold half a dozen at least."

Peter didn't altogether like the idea of her referring to his pictures as though they had been eggs, but he smiled cheerfully.

"You see, I'm not well-known yet. I'll do better after a while."

"A thousand," she added, thoughtfully. "But when you pay the commission that's only six hundred and sixty-six dollars and sixty-six cents."

She had, Peter was reminded, a talent for arithmetic.

"Well—that's not so bad for a beginning."

"And the frame," she insisted, "forty or fifty dollars."

"But pictures have to have frames, Josie."

"I think one-third is a terrible commission to charge."

Wingate and Mary met them at the station at Smithville across the river and drove them to the house. Martha had filled vases with flowers and Josie's room had been newly papered and refurnished in honor of the occasion.

She seemed very appreciative of it all, but as she was very tired from the journey she was put at once to bed.

The weeks that followed were busy ones to Peter, who was seeking the brighter moods of autumn in his work out of doors. Josie improved steadily and was seen again in the village, where she was greeted with great cordiality by Mr. Sam Small and other casual acquaintances. She had bought in Philadelphia during the weeks of her convalescence, with money that Peter had given her, some clothing and hats that had the truly metropolitan touch. Though somber in color, on account of the baby, they were rather modish for Red Bridge, but Josie wore them well and was conscious of something of a stir when she did the shopping. She went to the drug store of Mrs. Barclay and the dry-goods emporium of Mrs. Johanna Shank, enjoying a quiet triumph from the visits, for it was apparent that the pink minister, Mr. Snyder, had preached to these women, who had been the leaders in the indignation meeting, the uses of charity toward one who had suffered misfortune. Josie was very civil and bought freely. There was nothing left except to talk to Josie about the dead baby, which they did with accents of real commiseration; for in small communities death is a staple of conversation always indulged in with a kind of sad enthusiasm. And Josie wore an air of melancholy which created everywhere a very agreeable impression.

But it seemed fairly obvious to Peter that she had not greatly grieved over the loss of her baby. He realized that in the hospital she had been too ill to be able to grieve about anything and that when she was strong enough to be able to think, the child already belonged to past history. It had been, moreover, the record of a sin

which Peter was trying to eliminate from Josie's life. The child had been nothing to him, of course, but it seemed that she might, by her reference to it, have shown some token of motherly affection. She never spoke of the child, and once when Peter had begun to tell her of the pitiful funeral she closed the subject with an impatient phrase.

Peter thought he understood her attitude of mind. She seemed in other respects to have improved a great deal. Though cool, the weather was fine, and she and Peter went out often upon the river or upon the canal in his canoe. Peter had never quite decided to his own satisfaction whether the affection that Josie showed him was born of her gratitude or whether after all she had learned really to care for him from other and perhaps more sentimental motives. But with a wisdom that did him credit, he accepted the situation without question, sure of his continuing affection and of his hope to make of Josie a fine creature in every respect.

In the canoe during one of their moments of understanding she talked to him about Tommy Keith in a way that caused him a great deal of surprise.

"It's funny, Peter, how a quiet gink like you could have been such friends with a high flyer like Tommy Keith."

"Funny! Why?"

"Well, she never travels with anybody who won't give her a good time."

Peter paddled silently for a moment.

"Well—ah—that wouldn't apply to me."

Josie laughed. "Are you sure you didn't 'vamp' her, Peter?"

Peter stared at her and then grinned. "No, I didn't, Josie."

"Well, then, you must have winning ways that you don't know anything about. She's keen about you, all right."

"K—keen!" gasped Peter.

"Sure. Damn little fool!"

Peter didn't know whether to be flattered or offended.

"Oh, you're mistaken, Josie," he said at last, accompanying his reply with an energetic swirl of his paddle. "Tommy Keith is a very good friend of mine, but there's no sentiment of that sort about her."

Josie frowned.

"You never can see anything beyond your nose, Peter—you thought she came to Red Bridge just to pass the time of day. Well, she didn't. She thought you were going to marry me and she came down here to try to keep you from doing it."

She made this surprising announcement with the calm assurance of one who has only attained conviction through long moments of meditation. She was trailing her fingers in the water as Tommy Keith had done, with amusement at the bubbles that trailed away from them. The effect of this moment of confidence was to set Peter's thoughts whirling backwards upon his relations with these two women. The astonishing thing was that the assertion tacitly admitted that Josie had it in her mind to marry him before the thought of such a thing had even occurred to Peter. Incredible! There had never been a suggestion of such an idea in Josie's attitude of humility and gratitude! And as for Tommy's having any idea of wanting to marry him—marry *him*! Why? The notion was preposterous! Peter found himself suddenly laughing heartily.

"Well, she didn't get you," said Josie with a shrug. "I did." And then she splashed some water on him.

Peter grinned. "You're very nice when you're childish, Josie," he said.

Fragments of this conversation remained, however, with Peter during the afternoons while he was painting, for the painter's mind is very often at the mercy of his imagination. But after those moments of speculation, he reached the philosophic conclusion that Josie, with the privilege of her sex, had been inventing a very ingenious story to salve the wound to her self-esteem that Tommy's affair with Salazar had inflicted. Women were curiously retaliatory.

There were to be other moments that were not so happy. And Peter's final great disillusionment came when he went to New York with Josie, who, with an eye to business, had taken him to find out why Lablache hadn't sold any more of his pictures. Peter hadn't wanted to go. He had received his first check, which was sufficient for his present needs and his work was going better than usual. He had done "a rainy day on the river," which had met with Wingate's hearty approval, but there was more work to be done on it and a lot of odds and ends of work on other canvases which needed his attention in the studio. But he set off with Josie good naturedly. They would go to a hotel and spend the night. It would be a sort of lark for Josie. He hoped to see John Kingsley about further remittances, for the expenses at the hospital had been heavy and he would be needing more money before the first of the year.

He left Josie, who had some shopping to do, at the hotel, and went at once to the gallery of Lablache, enter-

ing the place with a confidence inspired by his first visit in Wingate's company. The same young men in spats were there but none of them seemed to remember him, so taking advantage of the moment he moved around the room, examining the pictures. One of his canvases leaned against the wall, and an old gentleman with eyeglasses was examining it casually. At this moment Mr. Lablache entered from some inner sanctum, a sheaf of papers in hands. He glanced at Peter but without sign of recognition, and handed the papers to one of the young gentlemen in spats. It was a place of great dignity, with a formal and exact technique devoted to the magnification of Art. It was therefore not surprising that Mr. Lablache, with the sense of his authority as high priest in this temple, should have failed to recognize the carelessly dressed visitor who was surely no picture-buyer. But Peter stepped forward and announced himself.

"Ah, Mr. Randle—of course," said Lablache, offering a white hand. "Mr. Wingate's friend. Delighted to see you. Did you get our little check? Not much, but still, a beginning. Your canvases have attracted much attention. We hope to do very nicely with them. It's lucky you came in to-day. There's a gentleman interested in the 'Dawn on the Hills'—coming in at noon with his wife. You must meet him. I think he'll buy it. It's almost twelve now. Will you wait? Make yourself at home, Mr. Randle. You'll forgive me for not recognizing you at once? But I meet so many people and have such a great number of important affairs. . . ." And with a flutter of the hand he disappeared like a skillful diver through the velvet curtains that hid the sanctorum.

There seemed to be no millionaires about the place ex-

cept possibly the old gentleman with the eyeglasses who had relinquished Peter's landscape and was diverting himself elsewhere. There was an excellent Wingate that Peter knew, and one of Joseph Garrett's, a screen of willow branches against the blue Delaware. Peter knew the spot and loved it, not as Garrett loved it—for its fairy pattern and fine design, but as a real place where one could sit and dream great dreams. Peter sighed. Would he ever be able to paint pictures as fine as the thoughts that inspired them? He could. He would. They were in him. Some day. . . .

Two people had entered and with an air of authority asked for Mr. Lablache. One of the young gentlemen went past Peter, hurrying. Peter, aroused from his dreams, examined the visitors. The man was tall and somber, with a square jaw, long blue chin and a prominent Adam's apple. He wore a diamond stickpin. His companion was a woman, blonde and fluffy with a reddish face, decorated with diamond pendant earrings and a black velvet hat with a large purple plume which swept her shoulders at every motion of her head. They looked like stage millionaires.

Mr. Lablache appeared almost instantly and came gliding forward with his shiny shoes along the polished parquetry.

"Ah, good morning, Mr. McFadden. And this is Mrs. McFadden? Very much honored. It is a beautiful day, is it not? You wished to see—ah—what was it?"

"What was it, Henry?" asked the lady. "It's got to match the hangings in my breakfast room, Mr. Lablache, and not too large. We don't want to spend over twelve hundred for it."

"Hills and a river," growled Mr. McFadden, his Adam's apple leaping up and down.

"Oh, yes. Let me see, I think I remember," said Lablache pensively. "A very fine picture—gray hangings—" And he gave some instructions to an attendant.

A colored man in a monkey cap, uniform and white cotton gloves came slowly carrying Peter's picture as though it were a casket of pearls. An easel was carefully adjusted, lights were turned on and Peter was face to face with "Dawn on the Hills."

"'Dawn on the Hills'," said Lablache in an awed tone. And then, as though further speech would have been inadequate to such a moment, was silent.

"Nice picture, Juliet," said Mr. McFadden.

"Y—es," commented the lady with a rising inflection. "But it looks too blue for my curtains."

"It may be the light, madam," said Lablache, instantly.

"Maybe. I guess it might do. Have you any others? Something a little pinker—as though the sun was just coming up. My curtains are a lovely shade. It wouldn't do to spoil them by putting the wrong color next. Here's a sample of the goods." And she produced from her wrist bag a small fragment of silk.

Peter had listened to these comments with interest in the religious atmosphere created by Mr. Lablache, so soon desecrated by the remarks of the visitors. Peter had worked desperately hard on "Dawn on the Hills," getting up every morning for a week long before daybreak in order to be on the spot in time to study the color at first hand. He loved the canvas. It was one of his best. He had had very fine moments alone with his Creator while he had worked on it. And these fine moments had been mingled

with the color upon his palette, and put into the very texture of the painting. As he listened to these comments, he felt the flesh prickling indignantly along his spine.

Mr. Lablache took the sample of material and gracefully advanced to the easel, placing it under the light.

"See," he proclaimed, "it is the light. A symphony, madam—"

"The picture is too blue—" insisted Mrs. McFadden.

"The sky's all right," put in Mr. McFadden, "maybe it's the hills—"

"Maybe it is," said the lady. "Couldn't you get the artist to put a little more pink paint on the hills—"

"I don't know," said Lablache. "Er—Mr. Randle, the artist, just happened to drop in this morning. Er—Mr. Randle, Mr. and Mrs. McFadden—"

Peter advanced slowly, his gaze on Mr. McFadden's stickpin.

"Mrs. McFadden has a morning room—er—of which she is very fond," explained Lablache suavely, "all in grays and—er—pink. (Am I right, Mrs. McFadden?) She was wondering whether you would be willing to make a few slight changes—"

"Just a little pinker, Mr. Randle. It would only take a few minutes. I like the frame. It's a beautiful frame—and the view of the river is lovely. Of course, I'm not an artist. But I know what I like and it just seemed to me that if there was a little more pink in the hills—"

"I'm afraid you don't like the canvas, Mrs. McFadden," said Peter, smiling.

"But I *do* like it, Mr. Randle. Mr. McFadden picked this one out."

"Oh, did he . . .?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Peter with great calmness. "You know I wasn't thinking of your breakfast room when I painted that. It's dawn, Mrs. McFadden, not sunset."

"Oh, of course, I knew that."

Peter watched Mr. McFadden's Adam's apple, which had begun to go up and down.

"I would suggest," added Peter, politely, "that you change the hangings in your breakfast room—or buy another picture."

"Change my hangings! Impossible!"

"That's too bad," said Peter. "It may not be a good picture, but I like it the way it is. Good morning."

And Peter walked out of the gallery and out of the building.

He had, of course, been tactless. He might, of course, have ignored the curtains in the breakfast room, or impersonally have remained silent and noncommittal. Or he might, as Mr. Lablache later in the day over the 'phone rather indignantly reminded him, have promised to make the suggested changes and then not done so, for Mrs. McFadden would never have known the difference.

But Peter had done none of those things. He had merely been honest with himself and with his art. This canvas that they wished to match with their window curtains was as much a part of him as his life blood. They might as well have asked him to change his skin to match the purple plume in Mrs. McFadden's hat. He didn't like her hat or her—they were entirely too self-sufficient. Mrs. McFadden did not love his picture. It was her breakfast room that she loved—and her breakfast. It was not such

people who could understand the serene beauty of the Delaware Valley at early morn. If his pictures were not to give people something of the joy with which they were created, it would be better if Peter had never painted them.

As he walked down the Avenue toward his hotel Peter tried to summon the ironic humor with which Wingate regarded some of his customers—and failed. The indifference of Lablache's customers to the sincerity of Peter's art had cut deep. They saw no beauty, felt no thrill. To Peter, the picture was already a failure, as he was.

Josie was not at the hotel where she had promised to meet him for lunch. So he ate alone, then went to see Mr. Kingsley at the Trust Company, where he was informed that the total of his remaining assets would possibly be less than five thousand dollars, payable as received from the settlement of Mr. Dawson's chaotic affairs. A civil suit for further restitution had been entered, but not much could be promised from it. At least this much was definite. There was a time when Peter had not thought a great deal of five thousand dollars. He had lost that much a dozen times in foolish financial ventures and had never even batted an eyelash. But five thousand dollars was now a fortune. He would need all the money he could make. This morning he had probably lost an opportunity. . . . It was too bad. But he felt no less affronted by the window curtains of the breakfast room.

2

Josie returned to the hotel late in the afternoon. She had done some shopping, met an old friend, a girl, she said,

and they had had lunch together. She seemed tired. But when Peter suggested a dinner somewhere on Broadway and a show, she began to take a new interest in things. A number of packages arrived before they left—two suits, half a dozen hats, other odds and ends. He had given her a sum in cash, but these articles arrived C.O.D., and the total amount was large. Josie had said nothing to him of her intention to buy these things and Peter thought that she should have spoken, especially as she had all that she needed; for there were limits to be put upon all their expenditures until he could establish himself more firmly as a painter of pictures that the buyers liked.

And so when he had arranged with the office to pay these bills, he told her quietly that he thought it would be better if she let him know beforehand just what she wanted and he would tell her frankly whether or not he could afford it.

This request, reasonable enough, expressed in Peter's mildest tone, irritated Josie.

"Well, if I did that I'd never get anything," she said, tartly.

Peter looked up at her over his paper. "I don't think I've ever denied you anything in reason," he said, quietly. "I told you we'd probably be pretty hard up for a while. I'd rather you wouldn't do it again."

"What do you want me to be? A nun?" she gasped. "Do you think a woman can walk down Fifth Avenue past all those shop windows without seeing things she needs to wear? I had to have those hats. I think you're mean to bring this up. You might think I'd been buying furs or an auto."

"I told you we didn't have a great deal of money to spend."

"Well, that's not my fault. You'd 'a' had it, if you hadn't gone and lost it all to a couple of 'con' men."

"There's no use talking about that—now."

"Well, you started this argument."

"There'd have been no need to have started it if you'd only—" He broke off with a shrug. "Oh, what's the use!" He buried his head in his paper, but Josie saw by the lowering of his brow that she had better say no more, and went on with her uncompleted toilet.

"What's happened at Lablache's?" she asked after a while, when Peter, restored to good humor by some little inexpensive trick of affection, was getting into evening clothes.

"Oh, nothing much," he muttered, struggling with his cravat.

"You mean they haven't sold any more?"

"No, they haven't. People seem to like my things, but they don't buy. I—I don't want 'em to buy if they don't care for 'em enough."

"That sounds all right," said Josie, practically, "but it don't bring any money."

"No. I'd rather it didn't. If people don't like my stuff as much as I do, I'm the man to keep it."

There was something suggestive of indignation in his tone and she turned toward him quickly.

"What's happened, Peter?"

With some bitterness, he told her of Mrs. McFadden and the breakfast room curtains, and the request to "put more pink paint on the hills." Josie only looked at him wide-eyed, her reddened lips parted in astonishment.

"Well, I don't see. . . . That was all right, a little more pink paint. Why didn't you do it?"

"You—you don't understand, Josie," Peter said. "That canvas has its definite scheme of color and pattern. It was carefully studied. Every square inch of it has a meaning to me. What that woman wanted me to do would destroy its tone, its quality, its beauty and its honesty. She might as well have asked me to forge my name to a check. I'd rather lose a sale than paint a lie for a few stinking dollars."

"Peter, you're crazy—stark, staring crazy! And you spoiled the sale?"

"I don't know, I don't care."

"Well, I guess Mr. Lablache does. The first thing you know he won't want to handle your pictures any more."

"Then I'll find somebody who will."

"Well, I declare! That's the way you come to New York to help sell your pictures! You oughtn't to be out without a guardian."

"I've had about enough of this," said Peter with the violence of a man who suspects himself to be in the wrong. "You don't know anything about it. After all it's not your business anyhow."

His tone made Josie angry and she raised her voice to dominate his.

"Well, then, if twelve hundred dollars don't mean anything to you—don't complain when I spend a few hundreds for things I've got to have. I guess I've got my rights just as much as you have. You married me, didn't you? You married me without telling me you might be poor. Well, it's not my fault you're poor. It's your fault that you let everybody 'do' you. It's your fault that you keep

Lablache from making a sale just because you're so dumb. You won't put a few touches of paint on a picture that a customer wants! And then you come back here to the hotel and try to take it out on me. Well, I won't stand for it, and that's that!"

Her voice had risen in a rapid crescendo and by the time she had finished she was shrieking. Peter, shamed at once at his loss of temper and abashed by the violences of her passion, had become silent. She was a creature that he no longer knew; the transformation from the humble guest of his household to this wild critic of his misfortunes had been so gradual that he had scarcely been aware of the difference in her point of view and attitude toward him, and pity had softened the ugly contours of her vulgarity. There had been transitions since their marriage, from humility to indifference, from indifference to aggression, but none of them had been offensive and were, he supposed, the natural outcome of their familiarity. This onset had been so sudden and so violent that he only stood staring at her in astonishment. Her voice was shrill like an orchestral instrument that had been forced beyond its pitch. It was not human but animal-like. He had lost his temper at her hopeless misunderstanding of his point of view. He had told her to mind her own business. He had even been guilty of an unpardonable stupidity. But none of these things had given her the warrant to shriek at him as she had done—and God knows what she shrieked was heartless enough.

He did not reply. After a moment he got into his coat, put on his hat, left the room and went downstairs into the lobby. He was angry and deeply disturbed, but the worst that he felt was a kind of misery at the terrible

revelation of her vulgarity and intolerance. He had never thought of her as wanting money. She had listened, as he remembered it, to the first telling of his loss of fortune, rather calmly. . . . She had perhaps expected much from the sale of his pictures. He had not known how strongly she was going to stand with him facing misfortune. He knew now. A blaze of hot light had enveloped and revealed her to him. . . .

One doesn't consider situations like Peter's in definite terms. He was stunned, his thoughts incoherent. What he first attempted to do as he wandered helplessly around the crowded lobby was to fix as clearly as he could his own share in the disaster.

It was, of course, a fact that both had been in the wrong and that attack had taken the place of self-defense. She had been extravagant and pugnacious in defense of it. He had lost a twelve-hundred-dollar sale when money was needed. He had shown false pride in his work, stupidity—she had been unsympathetic and aggressive—brutal.

There seemed no common meeting ground after so definite a sense of hostility. She had shown him the raw material of which her thoughts were made, the ugly and unjust resentments of which she could be capable. She was not the Josie of yesterday, but the Josie of to-morrow, for he would never be able to think of her now except in the terms of her expressed intolerance. . . . And yet . . . he must. She was—his wife, the woman he had sworn to cherish . . . even more definitely still, the woman he had saved from misfortune that he might renew her in hope and righteousness.

After a while he went up to the room. She seemed to

be sorry, for she wept a little and Peter kissed her. But the evening was ruined. Peter was very quiet during dinner. They went to a musical show—her choice—and in her laughter Josie seemed to forget that there had ever been a difference between them. He tried, as he had often done, to think of her as childish, but for the first time, failed. Their discussion was not renewed. And the next day they went back to Red Bridge.

CHAPTER XII

ANTAGONISTS

I

WINGATE had been very busy serving on the juries of picture exhibitions in New York and Philadelphia where Peter had sent canvases, which had been accepted. In New York, Mr. Lablache told Wingate of Peter's visit to his gallery and the unfortunate result of his tactlessness.

"I've been wanting to see you about this, Mr. Wingate. I like Mr. Randle's work. He has possibilities. But if I'm to do anything with it, you'll have to keep him out of my gallery. I can't have my customers insulted. Mrs. McFadden went down to Conradi's and bought another canvas. She might as well have bought here."

"I don't blame him for not agreeing to repaint it. I wouldn't either," said Wingate, loyally.

"He wouldn't have had to touch it," said Lablache in an injured tone. "But he might have left that to me."

Wingate laughed and went around to the Ritz; for Tommy had told Lola that she wanted very much to see him. They had an appointment and Tommy was ready for him with tea and cakes. Wingate was aware that she intended to ask him about Peter and his impossible wife, but he was not sure that he was willing to gratify her curiosity. He didn't like to talk about Peter's domestic affairs with any one, for he had always had a guilty

feeling that if he had been wiser he might have done something to prevent Peter's idiotic sacrifice. But he knew that Tommy had been very kind to his friend before the disaster which, like a bomb-shell, had blown Peter's friends in every direction away from him. Wingate even suspected from remarks that Lola had made that Tommy's friendship for Peter was more genuine and sincere than any that she had ever had for any man. He had thought it curious that a person of Tommy's tastes and habits could see anything interesting or even amusing in Peter's fanatic devotion to a lost cause, which, while possibly picturesque, had none of the garish attractions to which she had been accustomed in the men with whom she passed her time. Peter had done her a great service, of course, and in that had appealed to her imagination, but with her worldly attitude toward life she must surely have been disillusioned at the crowning act of Peter's credulity.

Wingate had not been seated long at her tea table before he was certain that it was not of his own affairs but of Peter's that Tommy intended to speak.

She talked of the picture that Wingate had painted for her, which hung in a good light opposite the windows and then led him to her dressing room, where she showed him "Afternoon Sunlight—Delaware River," the first and only picture of Peter's that Lablache had sold.

"So you were the good angel," Wingate said with a smile. "Lablache was very noncommittal."

"Well," she explained, "I got some one else to buy it. I wanted one of Peter's, just as I wanted one of yours. I like it. It's so quiet, so restful. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. It's a mighty nice thing. I'm glad you've got it. Poor old Peter!"

"Is he unhappy, do you think?" she asked as they returned to the drawing room.

"I didn't mean that. But he's having a stiff struggle for recognition. It's going to be difficult. He's going to be pretty hard up before long, I'm afraid." And he told the story of Mrs. McFadden and her breakfast room hangings.

"Yes," said Tommy, thoughtfully, through her smile, "he would do a thing like that. He's so desperately sincere."

"But of course he needs a guardian," put in Wingate with a laugh. "He always did need one. He's so futile."

"But what will he do when his money gives out?" she asked. "I offered to help him. . . ."

"Starve," said Wingate, laconically. "I know him. He'll never take a dollar from anybody."

"I'm afraid so. I wish. . . . Oh, it's too rotten bad—the whole thing, I mean."

"Well, perhaps—" Wingate had taken the cigar that she offered him and was turning it over and over in his fingers.

"What do you mean?"

He had already gone farther than he had intended to go, but Tommy's purchase of Peter's first painting had made a new bond between them.

"Oh, I don't know." He lighted the cigar with a cryptic air. "Peter has got to learn a lot of things, you might say his real education—in knowledge of the world—is just beginning. He hasn't reached bed-rock yet. I wonder what will happen."

Tommy sank back among the pillows on the davenport and sipped her tea.

"Do you know," she asked quietly, "how they are getting on?" He shrugged his shoulders impressively.

"How *would* they get along? What happens to a man who marries a woman out of pity? What happens to a woman who marries a man for his money and then finds he hasn't any?" He broke off with a laugh. "Oh, that's the big joke all right—and it looks as though it was on Josie Brant."

But Tommy didn't laugh.

"She's such a little beast," she said with conviction.

"All women are either beasts or angels. Josie Brant is not an angel. But then neither is Peter. He's about as politic as an April shower and Josie is a sordid, practical little devil. Can you imagine them getting on—especially when the grind comes for Peter—I mean, when the little money saved out of the wreck is gone?"

"But don't you believe he'll be able to sell anything?"

"Oh, yes. Once in a while. He's painting better. But it's going to take a long time before he makes a good income. I was nearly forty before I was making a living at painting and I'd been at it over twenty years."

"How terrible!"

"People who buy pictures are like sheep. They have to have a bellwether to lead 'em. Nobody liked Wingates until the French Government got one for the Luxemburg Gallery. Then American collectors began to take notice. The Metropolitan bought one. The other galleries followed. Now every American collector has to have one."

"The Metropolitan," Tommy repeated. "I suppose that *would* be important."

"Oh, yes. And it helps to be in the shows—a prize or two. Advertising pays."

"Is Lablache the best man to sell Peter's pictures?"

"As good as any one. But it takes a turn of fortune to make a man the vogue. I mean it. Luck and a bell-wether. There's a lot of good painters that can't make their salt. Good painters—mind you—better than Peter."

"It's rather hopeless," she said, slowly. And then with an air of intense interest: "Tell me the truth, will you? Has Peter possibilities? I mean of being a success—as you are?"

Her concern for Peter both amused and amazed him. He smiled at his cigar ash and then examined her face for a moment.

"Success? Success, my dear Tommy, doesn't always mean reputation—or money. The history of art is full of the names of painters who made great successes, but very little money. Their great reputations, too, came after they were dead. On the contrary, there have been many artists that have made a great deal of money, but were not successful. You can see their pictures in the furniture auction rooms almost any time." He paused for a moment of thought. "What kind of a success is it that you are speaking of for Peter? Do you mean, is he going to be a good painter, or is he going to make money?"

"I hadn't thought of it in just that way. Of course, I hope he'll have the kind of success that he wants for himself."

"Very well. Now we understand each other. I think that Peter paints well, then. In the past year he has really developed something of his own, a point of view.

He will paint better, provided—" Wingate paused again—"provided he has a fair and square chance to work out his problems."

"You mean—without interruptions or worries."

"Exactly."

"And you're afraid he won't get that chance?"

"I didn't say so. But the artist mind is a delicate piece of mechanism. It must be. You can't make beautiful things without delicate implements or implements that are very easily put out of adjustment by—well, let's say, stormy weather—"

"Do you mean," she broke in, "that Peter and—and his wife are not on good terms?"

Again Wingate's shrug in reply to the same question.

"This marriage is too amazing for my simple peasant soul," he said at last. "I think I know the motives that made it. But the motives that may destroy it are just as apparent. I don't know anything about their married life. When visitors come to the studio Josie burbles sweetly. She does it very nicely, and Peter smiles. But one wonders. . . ." He broke off abruptly—"Tommy," he cried, "I'm gossiping. I hate to gossip. You made me do it. And I'd made up my mind to do no more talking about Peter Randle's affairs."

"Well, it doesn't sound any too satisfactory," said Tommy.

2

To appearances the marriage of Peter Randle was all that it should be, and Red Bridge had passively accepted it, with the evident desire, on Peter's account, to forget that it had once been the nine days' wonder of the com-

munity. On the few occasions when they were seen out together by the villagers, the newly married pair created that impression of amiable tolerance which has come generally to be regarded as the accepted attitude for husband and wife. Josie decided that it would be wise to overcome, if possible, the prejudices engendered by Mrs. Beamish, the washerwoman from Milestown, and to that end did her best to be agreeable to every one in the village. Jane Garrett, having swallowed her pride in calling at the studio, also swallowed her compunctions and did what she could to give Peter's wife a proper standing in the neighborhood, doing such excellent missionary work among Peter's friends that in course of time they all accepted Josie and treated her with all the outward marks of civility.

Only Martha, Peter's cook, was aware that affairs were not going well in the Randle household, for Josie's voice was frequently heard, raised to the strident note that had so much disturbed Peter when he first heard it. It disturbed Martha, too, for this had always been a house of low voices and pleasant silences. Martha knew Peter's shortcomings as well as any one, but she knew also the greatness of the virtues that had made the marriage with Josie possible. Martha was a good-natured person, methodical and efficient, and she had always done what Peter wanted her to do without question or complaint. The visit of the strange woman to the house had not greatly discommoded her, for Josie had made the beds and relieved Martha of much of the cleaning. She had regarded the visitor with the large amiability that she gave to all of Peter's friends and accepted her as she accepted Peter's muddy boots or the irregularity of his

meals. The comment and gossip caused by the prolongation of the visitor's stay had shocked her. She had made her protest, but Peter, though responsive, had ignored her. The news of the marriage, when Peter and Josie had returned to Red Bridge, had stricken her mute, so upsetting her preconceived notions and opinions of them both that for days she had moved about as though in a sort of trance, performing mechanically the duties entrusted to her. But her devotion to Peter had at last conquered all her mental reservations. If Miss Peter thought it was the right thing for him to marry Miss Josie, it was right, and that's all there was about it.

And for a time all had seemed to go well. It was almost as though her employer might really be in love with his wife. There never was any love-making that she could see, but they got along all right together, and though Mrs. Randle gave Martha work that she had never had to do before, the colored woman managed somehow to do it, because, echoing Peter, she was sorry for any woman placed, no matter why or how, in Josie's position. When Josie had gone to the hospital Martha had taken as much pride in the refurnishing of the room upstairs as though the place had been her own, and welcomed the mistress of the house, for such she undoubtedly was, with every mark of loyalty.

But something was wrong. The loud, high, angry note that came in Josie's voice became more and more frequent, penetrating the thin partitions and resounding from one end of the small house to the other. And after a while the discussions, which had previously been reserved for the privacy of the studio or the evenings after

Martha had gone up to bed, were conducted openly, in the dining room with the door into the kitchen wide open. These discussions had to do, it seemed, with pictures, with money, with the people of Red Bridge, and with plans for a visit to New York. Mist' Peter sometimes raised his voice, but never as Miss Josie did, and seemed, Martha thought, more gentle than any man had a right to be with a woman who shouted at him like that. And after all he'd done for her! Martha sometimes felt like going in from the kitchen and taking Mist' Peter's wife by the shoulders and giving her the good shaking that she deserved.

Once, after an unusually unpleasant dinner, Josie got up and cried shrilly:

"I'm going to New York to-morrow. I'm sick of this damn place."

And the astonishing fact was that the next day she went.

Martha now began to be very sorry for her employer and to hate his wife accordingly. For a while Peter gave outsiders the impression that all was well in his household; it was quite apparent to Martha that he was very unhappy. He worked hard at his painting, up early in the studio or out in the open, painting the snow. But in his leisure hours he wore a troubled look. And he no longer sang as he used to do (slightly off the key) when he was getting ready for supper. He had a kind word for Martha, as always, but he never stopped in at the kitchen door for the old jokes about Martha's weight or about the prospects for her remarriage. Martha missed these things, and she missed Peter's smile.

It was in January that Josie had gone to New York.

She was away almost a week. When she returned, everything seemed to go smoothly for a while. Martha heard them talking after she went up to her room. Mist' Peter talked a great deal, but very quietly, and Miss Josie listened. And when she spoke she did not raise her voice as she had done before. Martha herself had been married. People didn't always get along well the first year. Maybe, after all, he might teach his wife how to behave. It was about time she learned what was due to a man like Mist' Peter.

3

There is no need to dwell unduly upon the unpleasant incidents of Peter's life with Josie. They were not mated. They did not speak the same language or use the same kind of thoughts in thinking about anything. And the lines of divergence were too wide to be reconciled. Peter talked to Josie, as Martha had observed, in a brotherly way, trying to make her understand his point of view on life, but she couldn't understand it. He hoped constantly that he might be able to stir within her a love for some of the finer things of life—good books, painting, music, but when he talked of these things she put on at once that dull mask of indifference to which he had grown so accustomed. She would have none of them. She knew nothing of music except the latest jazz or Broadway jingle. She understood nothing of Peter's art, and showed no desire to be initiated into the mysteries of its technique. She never read anything but the movie magazines and the daily New York newspaper, and sat, most of the time, with her hands in her lap looking out of the window at the wintry landscape, wearing an expression of hopeless and

utter boredom. She went to New York again and again, sometimes with Peter's consent and approval, but often against his advice and judgment—for there was no money to be spent unnecessarily.

To increase Peter's perplexities, before the coming of spring, he received a letter from Mr. Kingsley informing him that there were difficulties in the way of getting all the cash that he had expected and that for the present, the check enclosed (for fifteen hundred dollars) would be all that he might hope for. This was rather a knockout, for Peter who had been told that he might get at least two thousand more.

And so was added the threat of poverty. For Lablache had sold no more pictures, and while still holding expectations that he would soon find customers who would buy them, Peter's professional hopes were not much nearer fruition than when he had first decided to take his pictures to market. He did not know who had bought "Afternoon Sunlight—Delaware River," for Tommy had committed Wingate to secrecy and Lablache had given Peter a name that, of course, meant nothing to him. Peter had a perfect right to assume, as he did, that this warm canvas of pinks and purples had gone to adorn a breakfast room which had just happened to be suited to those agreeable colors. It is not difficult to understand that if Peter had known that Tommy was its purchaser, he would have been torn between the emotion of gratitude for her continued friendship, and that of despair that his art must rely upon friendship for its financial success. But he did not know, and it was well that Wingate had not told him, for this success was the one beacon to lead him on, the one stimulus to his hopes that there might be

others who might be induced by Mr. Lablache to put Peter Randle's landscapes upon their walls. All through the winter Peter visited the rural delivery post box every morning in the hope of finding a letter from Lablache, but none came. More than once he had thought of going to New York to see what the prospects were, but his previous visit to the gallery had been so disappointing to his pride that he shrank from placing himself again in a false position.

Meanwhile, the difficulties which seemed to be steadily encroaching upon his peace of mind were having an unfavorable influence on his work—which was quite bad. He had never been able to paint snow and the cold colors of the season did not appeal to him—at least, not in paint. Perhaps it was his timidity in expressing what he had to say about the epic of winter in the face of the assured triumphs of Frederick Wingate, who had said and was saying all that there was to be said upon the subject. Perhaps Peter's particular art needed the warmth and color of nature's more joyous seasons, for to these he had always responded with the fervor of one praying before the lights of an altar. But whatever the reasons for his failures, Peter was painting very badly and knew it. He tried "subject pictures" and "still life" in the hope of doing something saleable—with dismal results. To make matters worse when Peter painted indoors, Josie came into the studio and criticized his work. She criticized it, not from the point of view of a brother artist or even an interested layman, but with the frankness of her Broadway ignorance. She told him that his work was "rotten" and that he ought to paint dancers or harem scenes if he wanted people to buy. The worst

of it was that Peter knew that, as far as the work went, Josie was right. It *was* "rotten."

These conversations in the studio usually ended in discussions about money in which Josie's tongue had a singular fluency. She told him that he had not made good, which was superfluous. He knew it. She asked him what he was going to do when the last of the fifteen hundred was gone. This was also superfluous, for he didn't know that. And at last in an utter fury at his detachment, she would flaunt out of the studio and Peter would be left in a kind of stupefaction that was half of rage, half of despair.

Of course, Josie was within her rights. He had married her and she had every right to feel that he should support her. He would be very glad, in spite of her many deficiencies, to support her. But how? If his pictures didn't sell because people didn't think they were worth having, he didn't see just what he could do. He couldn't go about hunting millionaires with a gun and say: "See here, you! Buy this picture or I'll drill you full of holes." It wasn't done. Even Lablache didn't do that. If Peter's pictures didn't sell, they didn't; and that's all there was about that.

Well, what next? The place was mortgaged. It was doubtful whether more than a few hundred dollars could be borrowed on it in these difficult times. Of one thing Peter was certain. By the middle of April or the first of May he would be out of funds. Josie knew this, a definite fact that may have added something to the bitterness of her tongue. And the knowledge of his own deficiencies in bringing them both to this pass had made him helpless in the face of her verbal attacks. There were, of

course, his antiques that he could sell, excellent pieces of Colonial furniture that he had been collecting, some unusual American china and glassware. Wingate had long ago offered him a fine price for his corner-cupboard, and Joe Garrett was eager to own his sideboard. But the thought of parting with these treasures was heart-breaking. If Lablache could only sell one more picture! The psychological effect of another sale at this time would have been enormous—on Josie and on himself. Josie, it seemed, had given up hope and treated his desultory moods of optimism with the contempt that she thought they deserved.

The first of May came suddenly and with it—bills. There were a hundred dollars in the bank at Smithville. Peter drew them out. That night, after supper, Josie, whose mind could no longer look upon the situation from any point of view that did not consider her own immediate needs and unpleasant prospects, began again to upbraid Peter for the situation in which his credulity and failure had brought them.

"There's no use wasting words any more," she said, truculently. "You can't make any money, smearing paint around the way you do. Anybody can see that you don't know how to do it right. God knows why anybody bought that first one! I wish you'd never sold it. Then you wouldn't have had me hoping all winter that we'd have enough to get along on. And you were going to make fifty thousand a year!"

Peter reminded her that he had made no such promise.

"Yes, you did. Or you let me think so. And that's the same thing. Fifty thousand!" She laughed discordantly. "I don't know what got into me to believe you

could make any money that way. The only chance you had, you went and ruined, just because they asked you to do some little thing you didn't want to do." She shrugged her shoulders offensively. "I guess you wish you had that thousand now, don't you? Well, I do . . . poor simp!"

Peter had been finding it more difficult from day to day to keep his temper. He tried always to think of Josie as the child of her early environment. But the evidences of her heartlessness, constantly recurring since that evening in the New York hotel, had, with each new contact, hardened him against her until he forgot that she was the creature he had married out of pity and only an ill-tempered woman who reviled the pictures that he loved and treated him with a disdain that ignored all sense of her obligation, all sense of loyalty. He had long ago ceased to think of her as one who would share his misfortunes and he realized that the time had come when she would demand a reckoning.

"Why didn't you tell me before I went to New York that you weren't going to make any money? I'd have stayed there. I can make a living if you can't. I could have gotten my old job at the theater back if I'd asked for it." She flaunted across the room to the window and looked out into the darkness. "Oh, I can get along," she said with a laugh intended to hurt him. "You aren't the only man in the world."

Peter started up, aware of the insinuation that had slipped beyond the border of her caution. He stared at her intolerant back while his tongue sought words. Perhaps she was only fooling or trying to hurt him because she knew that this was the thought that would make him

most unhappy. Peter believed that she had lived straight since he had married her. He believed that as his wife she had learned something of the meaning of self-respect and he had hoped that the terrible experience through which she had passed had saved her from further temptations. Even if this marriage had not been successful he thought that he had, at least, done her this service—taught her this much. Otherwise . . . what he had done had all been in vain. What had she implied? . . . Other men . . . ?

“See here, Josie,” he said, swinging his palms up and down, “I can’t have you talking like that—”

She twisted around, her glance flitting past him over his shoulders.

“I mean it,” she said with a laugh. “Do you think I’m so old or ugly that I can’t find another man? Oh, say!”

“Stop that kind of talk. D’ye hear! You can’t talk like that—not now— You’re married to me. You’re my wife.”

“Oh, I should worry!” she said, disdainfully. “Your wife! What’s that? Your wife that you can’t support—or even keep as well as I used to live! What’s that to me? No woman has to stay married to a man who can’t give her a decent living. You ought to know that. Oh, I’ve stuck by you so far. You did me a good turn once. But I’ve done what I ought for you, too—mended your clothes, washed your dishes and cleaned your house—living in this hick town away from everything, standing for the turn-downs of your stuck-up friends, and trying to get along without any money to do anything with—even to eat. What do you think we’re going to live on? Air? Or do you want me to take in washing,” she added,

ironically, "so that you can go on painting those damn daubs?"

"Don't talk like that, Josie," he said, slowly.

"Well, you talk then, how are we going to get along?"

"Well—ah. I'll have to see about that. We'll get along. I've got some valuable things here—that I can sell to tide us over until the—ah—market for my pictures gets better—"

"What things valuable—?"

"Furniture—"

"Those old things! They're all falling to pieces." She laughed again and turned her back to him. "I guess you haven't got very good sense," she finished, contemptuously.

Again, ignoring her insult, he tried to consider her point of view, even condoning her ingratitude by thoughts of his own insufficiency in the practical affairs of life. To him this conversation was only a repetition in slightly more definite and more unpleasant terms, of other conversations that they had had upon the subject of their finances and his failures—with one addition. She had introduced, perhaps inadvertently in her anger, a new and sinister element into their relations—the implied threat of an affair in New York, which ignored their marriage and threw upon her mental scrap heap every consideration of honor and decency. He could not believe that she had been in earnest.

"Josie," he said quietly, "I know there's a lot on your side. I guess maybe you've been so disappointed that you can't help talking wildly sometimes. But I don't want to hear you say anything more about any other man. That

kind of—ah—childish talk might have been all right—when you were single—without responsibilities. But you mustn't talk that way now—even if you do think it's a good joke to make me angry."

Her slanting glance flashed at him.

"What do you think I care—whether it makes you angry or not? You haven't got any right to tell me what I can do or what I can't. You talk about my being your wife, as though you expected me to keep on living here and doing your chores—even with no food to eat in the house and no way of getting any. Well, I tell you now—I can make my own living. I made it, all right, before I came down here. I guess I can do it again. And I'd like to say that it's none of your business who I go with or why. I guess that's plain enough."

Peter stood before her, swaying from side to side, eyes closed, brows thatched, trying to govern his rising temper. In her fury she had made her meaning sufficiently clear to him. But what he couldn't understand was the stupendous fact that this woman whom he had made respectable by the sacrifice of his liberty and good name could repudiate all decency and lightly turn again toward the perils that had brought her ruin. All fondness for Josie, the waif, had gone, for the fondness had been the fondness of pity and her intolerance had driven even pity from his heart. But he had hoped that his sacrifice for her, at least, had not been in vain—that whatever happened, she could never again turn to the life from which he had saved her. She had awakened him rudely and like the man so awakened groped puzzled for a moment, as if against a glare of light, for his numb wits. He couldn't understand how such a sacrifice as his could have been made in vain. He had

failed in this, too—the most prodigious failure of all his idealism!

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, staring at her as though finding difficulty in focusing them upon her.

“I’ve told you—you mustn’t speak like that,” he said in a sort of growl.

She did not understand the rage of disappointment that consumed him or the meaning of his short phrases. But she was clever enough to know that she had hurt him through his pride, his pride in all things that were his and could still hurt him most through this threat—this threat that he himself had made possible by his failures. She put her hands on her hips and defied him with a laugh.

“Well, you can’t tell me who to go with or not to go with. I’ll decide that for myself. You haven’t made good. You can’t support me and I guess you know what that means. I’ll go with any man I choose—a regular fellow who can give a woman something more than the white lights of Red Bridge, Pa.”

She should have taken warning from the expression upon his face, by the slow opening and shutting of his long, strong fingers. But she was so infatuated with the hurt that she was giving him that she did not realize that she was going too far—that if there had been any misgivings in his mind as to her visits to New York, she was now providing him a motive for suspicion. But he seemed so dumb, so helpless that she did not fear or reckon on any power within him, for she still estimated him by her experience of his gentleness, his credulity and his failure.

But something in her voice made him suddenly look up at her as if with some new keen inner vision. She had spoken too much of this alternative of hers—made it more real to him. Something of the quick sudden suspicion that flashed through his brain was communicated from his eyes to hers. It was a fire too keen to be withstood and her own glance fell away.

He took a quick stride and caught her shoulder roughly.

"What have you been doing in New York?" he asked her, hoarsely.

"Nothing. I couldn't stay in this damn place," she said, sullenly. Her glance fluttered up to his, then darted away, here and there. She knew now that she had gone too far, for she had never before seen just that fire in his eyes.

"What have you been doing in New York?" he repeated with greater violence.

"Nothing, nothing, I tell you," she moved her shoulder under his hand and tried to wriggle away. But his hand caught her other shoulder and swung her around so that he could look into her eyes. She stared at him brazenly, not yet really afraid—only wondering how she could have been such a fool as to give herself away. What he saw in her eyes seemed to arouse him to some new pitch of fury. He held her before him and went on with a kind of madness, emphasizing his words with the pressure of his hands on her shoulders.

"You're my wife, you understand. My wife. Do you know what that means? It isn't only your honor that you've got to keep—but mine—the honor I gave you when I married you. My name—and by God! you've got

to keep that clean." He caught her more violently. "What have you been doing in New York?"

The reiteration of that insistent phrase with all the meanings that lay behind it, beat upon her brain like thunder down the valley in August. The lightnings, too, were in his eyes. She could not endure them.

"I—I haven't been doing anything," she stammered. "I—let me go—do you hear?"

"Not until you tell me what you've been doing in New York. Who's this man that's in your mind? I saw him there—in your eyes. What made you speak of him? You just couldn't help speaking of him, trying to hurt me. You've given yourself away. Who is this man? Tell me."

"No man, nobody," she whimpered.

"Who is he? Answer me."

He was shaking her as though she were an old garment that needed renovating.

"Who? Who?" he cried.

She was frightened now at the look she saw in his eyes and at the hurt of the clutch of his fingers in her flesh. He was dominating her. She felt her power going in pain and terror.

"Look at me," he commanded. "Look me in the eyes." And slowly against her volition she obeyed him.

"What were you doing in New York? There *was* a man, wasn't there? Answer me."

But she couldn't speak and only stared at him like a beast cornered and too terrified to fight.

"There was a man," he insisted, hoarsely.

Her lips tried to form a word. But he had no need to hear her words. Her eyes had said them.

Suddenly, the futility of the whole situation seemed to come to him. By imprisoning her body he had been thinking he could imprison her soul. Her soul! He relinquished her so suddenly that in staggering back she stumbled and fell upon the couch where she lay, breathing heavily, her narrow eyes still flickering with fear.

He took a pace forward and stood over her. He swung his open hands up and down. She thought he was going to strike her. But instead, with a choking sound from his throat, he turned away and rushed out, out of the room, and out of the house.

All that Peter could think of as he trudged the roads through the snow was how white and how near her slender throat had been to his strong fingers. He was frightened now—how near he had come to. . . . It didn't do for a man to get into a rage like that. He had never been angry in just that way. Righteous anger, with a rational motive—yes. Not this. This was not righteous. It was a fury, unreasoning; and while it lasted, dangerous. A woman, too—his wife. He had seized her brutally, shaken her, almost struck her. He had laid his hands violently upon a woman. He had felt his fingers crunching through her soft flesh down to the bone. He had hurt her, been brutal—cowardly. He felt weak, demeaned, as though the manhood had been taken from him. . . . The reaction had set in.

And what was to be done now? She hated him. And he—God knows—there was no more pity to be given her. And yet . . . yes . . . he would have to find the semblance of it. It was all so horrible—to have tried so hard to help her and to have failed! But there was a duty

still to be done—money. He would have to have money. She was right. He had failed in that too.

He thought of these things as he tramped the muddy roads far beyond Milestown. He realized that he had come away from the house bareheaded and that the night was cold, but it didn't seem possible for him to turn his steps toward home.

Then suddenly he stopped and started back, running down the hills, driven by the impetus of a new resolution.

He stopped breathless to climb a hill. Physical action had cleared his head of its hot blood. He could think clearly now and words of the marriage service came to him, startling in their definiteness. He and Josie would have to go on. He would have to make her see that as he saw it. Carry on!

He would get money. They always needed good men down at the oil works. He knew Sinclair, the superintendent. Sinclair would give him a job if he asked for it. And wages were good these days. There would be money enough. And then—a picture sale, perhaps. From the top of the last hill he could see the black pall of the river beyond the island and he hurried on full of his new resolution. That thought about the oil works. . . . Josie would see, at least, that he was ready to do what he could. . . .

He ran over the bridge, down the lane and to the house. From the sheds the dogs barked. There was a single light upstairs in his bedroom. He entered the house and ran up the stairs. Josie's room was dark. He called to her. There was no reply. Martha slept soundly. He took the lamp into Josie's room. It was in disorder, clothing scattered about like a rummage sale. But Josie was not there,

or anywhere in the house. At last he found a note on the bureau in his room. It was a mere penciled scrawl. But it was quite definite. Josie had gone. She gave no address. And the bureau drawer, open, revealed the fact that she had taken from it the money that he had drawn that morning from the Smithville bank.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SAMARITAN

1

TOMMY KEITH had learned one thing during her brief and rather eventful acquaintance with Peter Randle: that she had within her boundless possibilities for sympathy toward the misfortunes of those she cared for.

It cannot be said that the disasters that had befallen her visionary friend had made any change in her way of living or in her general point of view as to her obligations to society, which continued to be based on the presumption that society owed her the good living that she had always enjoyed, and that barring accidents, such as the collapse of the financial system of the country or the destruction of the world, she intended to continue to enjoy it.

She followed in her entertainment, as before, the lines of least resistance, but she followed them, thanks to the lesson that Peter had given her, with more circumspection. Men of the type of John Salazar had become taboo. She permitted harmless idiots like Jimmy Blake to follow in her train, and with them she made a great stir of having a good time, managing, with the help of the theater and the dance to defy the moments of boredom so dreaded by those who live for pleasure alone.

Tommy herself would not have understood if she had

been told that she had changed. For the difference in her attitude was subtle and subjective. She was, perhaps, slightly more sane, taking her diversions calmly with a truer sense of her smaller value in the cosmic scheme. She was less subject to the influence of the mass hysteria of her old crowd and frequently went to her hotel to bed before the middle of the evening. She did not know just what was the matter unless it was that she was no longer as young as she used to be. But, curiously enough, her mirror advised her that she was looking surprisingly well and rather prettier than last year, when she had been going at such a pace.

At odd moments she thought a great deal of her friend Peter Randle, whose fantastic sacrifice for the sake of a fixed idea had so much appealed to her imagination. But she knew that such an ideal as his must soon become shopworn by sordid contacts, and she had, through Frederick Wingate, already learned that things were going badly at Red Bridge. Tommy had never admitted to herself that she was in love with Peter because it wasn't in the nature of things that a girl with her looks and wealth and all New York to choose from should fall in love with an acknowledged failure (as the world weighs success), a hopelessly impractical creature and now the husband of a worthless woman bent upon his destruction. If there was any person in the world less considerable as the object of a tender passion on the part of a wealthy young woman of the great world, that man was surely Peter Randle. And yet it was strange that she continued to think of him with the tenderest of sentiments of pity for his misfortunes and a kind of grudging admiration for the quixotism that had persisted to inspire him to his

marriage in spite of all opposition. Of the marriage Tommy thought scurrilously. It was, of course, legally quite valid, but the incidents leading to it and the unemotional way in which Peter had bound himself had invested it with an informality that seemed very far from sacramental. Peter did not love the woman; he had told Tommy that. He had merely given her his name because he had a name that didn't seem to be of any particular use to him or to anybody else and this woman had needed it. Tommy considered that there were finer unions of souls than any that could be made by the Philadelphia magistrate who had read something out of a book and pocketed the fee that Peter had given him. The whole affair had been preposterous. The world could call such a performance a marriage if it liked, but Tommy didn't, for marriage, according to Tommy's idea, was something quite different.

But as an impediment to her friendship for Peter she had been forced to admit its success. It was an impediment that she could not recognize and yet was forced to bow to. She would have liked very much to see Peter in New York and to continue their friendship from the point at which it had been broken, and she resented the restrictions that had been put upon her by this matrimonial absurdity. Tommy had always been accustomed to doing anything that she liked to do, and she was annoyed that she couldn't have gone on helping Peter to happiness and success as she had planned. Perhaps if she had been successful in diverting him from his intention to give Josie Brant a name, by using the arts that she employed in bringing other men to her feet, Tommy might speedily have tired of the game and of Peter. She had an

idea, nevertheless, that in spite of the casual quality of his regard for her, she might have managed to save him, if she had tried. She had attempted nothing of the sort, although Lola had been a party to the visit that had been planned with that purpose. In the face of Peter's ingenuous and honest friendliness for her, Tommy had found herself as honest as he. He was not the sort of a man to be "vamped." His simplicity had been sacred to her.

And yet there were moments now when she wished that she had not been so scrupulous, for even if she had never come actually to the point of marrying Peter Randle, she could at least have done him a useful service and thus partially repaid him for bringing her to sanity in an hour that had threatened her with grave danger. She had never been able to think of herself as married to Peter. That had been too amusing an idea to be considered seriously for a moment; and yet since his marriage Tommy had found herself thinking how much better it would have been if she and not Josie Brant had married him.

And as the winter passed into spring further news reached her that Josie, balked of the comfortable living that marriage was to bring her, had proceeded in many ways to make things as unpleasant as possible for her unfortunate and complacent husband. She had left Red Bridge frequently for visits to New York while Peter remained at the studio, painting pictures that nobody would buy. Tommy knew that by this time he must be in very difficult straits for money. She would have liked to help him by buying other pictures to hang on her dressing room wall, but the idea of providing Peter with money so that the Brant woman could come to New York and spend it did not particularly appeal to her. If Peter's

marriage was to end upon the rocks, the financial rock was quite as serviceable for the purpose as any other.

The ending of Peter's fatuous venture came with a startling suddenness to Tommy, who was scarcely prepared for Frederick Wingate's rather dry narration of the wreck. But there seemed little doubt that the Randles had reached the parting of the ways. Wingate's first intimation that things had gone definitely wrong had come quite by chance from Janet Kearns, who worked in Johanna Shank's dry-goods store. Miss Kearns and young Tom Barclay were out (spooning probably) along the road toward Milestown when they met Peter Randle, bareheaded, walking furiously and with an air of such troubled abstraction that he did not recognize or even notice them. A while later, he passed the promenaders, running at full speed, and disappeared in the direction of his home. Even this apparent aberration of Peter's might not have attracted attention, for he was, of course, a person who could be counted upon to do unusual things. But the departure of Mrs. Randle from Smithville for Trenton, alone, on the late train the same night was a matter for general discussion in Sam Small's store. Mrs. Barclay put two and two together. So did Mrs. Shank. And Sam Small's delivery wagon driver, sent to the island a few days later with the pretext of a forgotten bag of flour that concealed the real purpose of his visit, reported that Martha, the colored woman, with an air of wrath, had as much as told him that Josie Randle had left Red Bridge "for good." This item of information, both pleasing and distressing, had passed with the speed of the wind up the main street and been wafted at last in the direction of the studio upon the hill.

To Wingate the news had seemed too good to be true and so he had gone down to Peter Randle's studio in the hope of verifying the story and offering either his congratulations or commiserations as Peter required or desired them. Peter was working on a new picture in the studio—a larger canvas than the earlier ones. Peter had been glad to see the visitor, offering him both drink and cinnamon buns. His usual air of frowning abstraction was not lacking when Wingate had entered, but the duties of hospitality awoke him and he had become quite jolly, producing from his pocket a check which he had exhibited with great pride. It was from Lablache, who had sold a picture of Peter's—"Dawn on the Hills." It was a sale to a collector who had been quite frankly enthusiastic about his purchase, and, of course, Peter was correspondingly elated.

"Of course," Wingate went on, "that was really bully for Peter. I imagine he must have been about at the end of his tether when that check reached him. He told me he owed a lot of money. But he said nothing of Josie's absence and I made no comment on it—naturally. The whole thing seems pretty clear. Peter went broke and she left him. And by a curious irony, the check of Lablache's arrived some days later, just too late to save the situation—"

"To *save* it!" Tommy said.

Wingate laughed. "You think luck was with him?"

"Well, rather. If she was going to leave him—"

"No time like the present? Perhaps you're right. Only Peter may not agree with you."

"How idiotic! You think he will try to make her come back?"

"God knows. Nobody knows what Peter wants to do. It's rather a terrible thing for Peter's pride not to be able to support the woman—not to be able to finish something that he started."

"But he can't get far on the sale of one picture," Tommy put in.

"It would seem millions to Peter. He's like that—way up or down—no sense of values whatever. He let fall a hint that he might be coming to New York."

"Looking for her!" Tommy exclaimed. "That would be too stupid."

Wingate rose. "You forget, my dear, that in this matter our poor friend is suffering from an ingrowing conscience."

Tommy saw him to the door. "If he's wise, he'll let her go to the devil in her own way."

"If he'd been wise—say, as wise as you and I are, Tommy," said Wingate with his widest smile, "he'd have let her go to the devil in the first place."

2

Wingate had not been mistaken. Peter came to New York looking for his wife, armed with some old addresses and an inflexible determination to do his duty in saving her from further perils and restoring her to his household in full comfort and contentment. The sale of his picture loomed large. The world had suddenly become roseate again. There would be enough money. He was sure there would be money enough to satisfy any of Josie's exactions.

He did not know whether or not Josie, in expectation

of his search, had hidden herself, but he learned to his dismay that the persons at the places where he hoped to find her showed the most complete ignorance as to her whereabouts. And he went up the Avenue in the direction of his hotel at the close of a long and weary day very much discouraged at his failure. But Fate, never having gone out of the way to be kind to Peter except in the doubtful matter of his heritage, now decided to compensate for past neglects by doing Peter a good turn. And to achieve this, had placed Tommy Keith directly in the path of his lagging footsteps, so that he almost bumped into her. Immersed in his gloom he did not recognize her. Taking off his hat politely in Tommy's general direction and mumbling an apology, he would have passed on, if she had not seized him by the arm.

"Why, Peter! Peter Randle! You aren't going to cut me!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, ah—Tommy! Of course—that is—no—not at all. I didn't want to cut you. I—didn't see you—ah—Tommy. Stupid of me—very! How do you do?"

"Fine," she said, looking him up and down. He had an air of neglect and his hat was dusty. "And how are you, Peter?"

"All right," he asserted. "Quite all right."

"It's fine to see you. It seems an age."

"Yes, it does," said Peter, joining in her commonplaces with a sense that after all there was a great deal that was agreeable about them.

"Are you going over toward the Avenue?" Tommy asked, taking charge of the situation briskly. "I want you to walk with me and tell me all about your work. Isn't it lucky we met?"

"Very," Peter said, falling into pace beside her. "One must have luck sometimes."

She glanced at his sober profile, aware of the sincerity of the sentiment, aware also of the disappointments that had given it utterance.

"Peter," she said, "you're looking tired."

"Am I?"

"Yes, dead tired. Do come up to the apartment. I'll give you a cup of tea and you needn't talk if you don't want to. You can lie on the divan and take a nap, if you like."

"I'm not sleepy," he said with a smile.

"Aren't you? Well, then, you needn't take a nap. You can just sit. I won't talk to you unless you like."

"But I want you to talk." He turned his round eyes upon her. "It's rather jolly again."

"Then you'll come?"

"Why—ah—yes. If you want me."

There was a great deal that she wanted to say to him, but at the moment every thought she had seemed to approach the personal, so she resorted to a light patter of small talk in which she was adept. Peter lumbered along beside her, the heaviness of his mood already penetrated here and there by little shafts of lightness. There was something very gentle in her attitude toward him, something rather soothing, too, in the familiarity of her friendliness, like a homely joy that had been too long deferred. She had a well-modulated voice. He wondered that he had never noticed it before.

It was not until they reached her apartment that Tommy could give proper vent to her impulses in a convincing hospitality. She touched bells and people came

taking orders. She made Peter sit in the big chair by the table, patted a pillow into place at his back and then brought him a drink.

"Here, take this!" she commanded, "you look as though you needed it. We'll have some tea in a moment."

"Oh, thanks," he said. "That's bully. I think I will."

He drank and then ate the crackers that she handed him, so eagerly that Tommy stared at him in suspicion.

"When did you eat last, Peter?"

"Why—what . . . ?"

"You haven't had any lunch—"

"I was very busy—I didn't think—"

"How silly! I'm going to feed you, Peter."

He protested, of course, but when the tea and sandwiches came, he found himself eating with a relish which contributed still further to his contentment.

If the way to a man's heart is to be found through his appetite it almost seemed as though Tommy had discovered it, for Peter relaxed in his chair, grinning cheerfully at the toes of his dusty boots. When he had eaten and finished two cups of tea, she made him fill his pipe and smoke. It was all extremely cheerful and comfortable. He could not remember when he had been so comfortable before and he yielded to the sense of well-being like a cat before an open fire. He would have purred, had he been supplied with the proper vocal machinery. Peter had never been dependent upon luxuries for his happiness and there had been, even at Red Bridge, a kind of austerity in his habits of life. And so it was with a feeling of guilt that he indulged himself in the softness of Tommy's down cushions and in the gentleness of her smile. He was, she could see, very thoughtful and sober

beneath his air of contentment, smiling slowly as though not entirely certain that he ought to smile. There were lines that drew his lips downward and the shadows at his eyes were deeper. She had, in his absence, so frequently thought of him as a fool—affectionately and with regret, but as a fool. Now with his bulk and soberness before her she was ready to revise that opinion. For as she studied him attentively, she could find no shadows of weakness in Peter's face—shadows of humor, of inquiry, of pity, sensitive shadows that came and were lost again in the deeper shadows of decision, but she could find no sign of weakness there. In his eyes a look of seeing across hill-tops that rose in lovely serenity above the smoke and dust and heat of valleys below. There might be just a trace of madness in them, the madness of one who dares to dream.

Well, had Peter come to the end of his madness, the fool to the end of his folly? Tommy would have given much to know, and yet had not dared to ask him. She recalled phrases of Wingate's as to the lessons that Peter must learn of life itself, and yet, it seemed as she looked at him that the characteristics that had at first impressed her had gained rather than lost by his failures.

She had a sense of his reservations as to his private affairs and yet she was determined, if she could, to break through them. It was quite unimaginable that Peter could have loved this woman. His reticence was based, of course, upon his failures and upon his pride. But the hour was propitious. She felt sure that if she permitted Peter to go forth from her apartment without giving her his confidences, the moment might not soon occur again. She had recognized Peter's marriage as an impediment to

their friendship, but that was, one might say, all the recognition she had given it. There had been a tremendous upheaval of all of Peter's preconceived notions of life, a violent shock to disarrange the processes of his thought and it seemed that already something rather definite in the way of a new attitude of mind must have been evolved from the wreckage of his plans to enable him to go on. It was of this that she wanted him to speak. The deep thatch of his brow warned her of her intrusion, but she spoke at last, plunging quite recklessly into the very middle of her subject.

"Of course every one knows that Mrs. Randle has left you, Peter. I'm beginning to feel a little hurt that you shouldn't have said anything to me about it."

He straightened and regarded her with solemn astonishment.

"Every one!" he muttered. "How could every one know? I've seen no one—spoken to no one— It's not true—"

She smiled calmly. "To keep a secret, Peter, you must live in a city. You shouldn't try to lie to me. You're very awkward at it."

"Oh!" He sat silent for a moment, puffing on his extinguished pipe.

"I wouldn't speak of it, Peter, if I didn't think our friendship gave me the right. You broke past my barriers once when I needed help. Well, I'm breaking past yours to help *you*. I hope you don't mind. But whether you mind or not, I'm going to speak because I'm very, very sorry—"

He sawed the air with his hand violently.

"But you mustn't be sorry for *me*. That's just the

point. It's very kind of you, Tommy. But I don't deserve anything like that. I can't have you being sorry for me."

"But I am, just the same," she insisted.

"There's no use talking like that," he said, confusedly. "I've made an awful mess of things. It's all my fault. I ought to have known that I wasn't the sort to be able to please a woman. And then—" he muttered somberly, "I didn't make good. I couldn't expect her to stick to me if I didn't make a living. She was within her rights. Yes. She's left me. I've come over here to find her and take her back to Red Bridge."

"Why?" asked Tommy, coolly.

"Why—?" He stared at her round eyed. "Because—because, that's where she belongs—"

"Are you sure?"

He frowned deeply. Tommy thought for a moment that there would be a flare of anger. But his brows cleared immediately.

"Yes, I'm sure. I married her. She's my wife. Those are the bare facts. Other things can't be allowed to matter—"

"Even if—" Tommy spoke deliberately, shooting her arrow into the air in the belief that it would strike a mark. "Even if she doesn't want to come back? Even if she finds New York more—er—to her liking than Red Bridge?"

He stared at his inquisitor, for Tommy had put into her tone a startling omniscience.

"That mustn't matter either," he muttered, quickly. "She's got to come back. I'll take her back. I'm ready to take her back no matter what she's done."

The success of Tommy's stratagem abashed her. In robbing him of his secret she felt as guilty as though she had stolen money from his pocket. It had been so easy to find out what she wanted to know—so ridiculously easy. And if she could play so successfully upon his ingenuousness how easy for Josie Brant to! The woman was faithless; had, perhaps, been faithless for weeks. But in spite of her mental reservations Tommy followed her advantage coolly.

"I'm afraid the old life is too alluring. How can you make her go back, Peter?"

"Well, I'll have to see about that," he muttered. "The trouble is I don't know where to find her. I've been hunting all day. I had the addresses of friends of hers, but nobody would tell me anything. It almost seems—" He stopped speaking suddenly, unaware that it was quite possible for Tommy to finish his thought for him.

"It's quite obvious," she concluded for him, "that she doesn't want to see you."

"You think so? Well, it does look that way. But I'm not convinced. And I'm going to stay here until I find her."

"Oh, I see," said Tommy, quietly. "You've made up your mind to that."

Peter got up and fumbled in his pockets for tobacco.

"I—I didn't come here to talk about my troubles. I didn't want to talk about them to anybody—even to you, Tommy. But now that you know how things are, you can see that there isn't anything else to do. I've been a terrible disappointment to her—about money and other things. If it hadn't been for losing my money, I might

have managed to help her." He twisted toward Tommy eagerly. "Don't you understand? I couldn't support her. There was barely food enough in the house for a meal or two—debts—and no money. She was within her rights in going away. It's all my fault."

He strode about the room unhappily. "And then, after she left, a check came from Lablache. Somebody bought another picture. I saw Lablache yesterday. He may sell another. But it's all come too late. Don't you see, that it's my pride, my honor that's involved in doing what I set out to do—for Josie—to give her a place in the world? Well, I've failed, Tommy—failed terribly."

He sank into a chair and stared somberly at the rug.

There was a moment of silence and then Tommy got up and walked around, fingering things.

"Peter," she said at last, "once upon a time you came into this room and took a lot of liberties with my feelings. You told me some rather brutal truths—and I listened to them. Now I'm going to tell you some. You made me your friend and you've got to take the consequences. To begin with, I might as well be frank and tell you that I did all I could, in reason, to open your eyes to the character of the woman you married—"

"Don't, please, Tommy—"

"Yes, I must. And you've got to listen. Do you think that I'd take all this trouble about you if I didn't care for you a great deal? I'm not the kind to take an interest in a man and then see him ride pell-mell to the devil. You thought you could save Josie Brant by giving her a new start in the world. You think even now that you could have saved her if you hadn't lost your money, or if you'd managed to sell more pictures. Well, I'd like to tell

you that women of her sort can't be saved just by money. Any woman worth saving would carry on for the man who had done his best, no matter what his failures were. You gave Josie Brant the best you had—the best that you were capable of and I won't listen to you blaming yourself for what couldn't be helped. You took her in, defended her against her enemies and your own friends, and then gave her your name— That woman!—your name! And now she leaves you. . . . You needn't try to make me think any better of her. She's no good. She never was any good and never will be."

"You—you're speaking of the woman I married," Peter gasped helplessly.

"I know it," she said, briskly. "If you hadn't married her I wouldn't be speaking of her. Marriage!" she went on contemptuously. "Do you think a word like that means anything to me when I know the farce you made of it? That wasn't marriage. It was just sacrilege. You lied—you told me you didn't love that woman. If you could have loved a woman like that I wouldn't have cared what happened to you. You'd have deserved what you got." And then eagerly, "You didn't love her, did you, Peter?"

Peter had sat bent forward, his head in his hands listening to the bitterness of this harangue, which came to him as though from afar like the voice of his own spirit telling him truths he was trying to deny. He knew now that what Tommy said was true, but he knew that she had no right to be saying it or he to be listening. But she was his friend and what she said, bitter as it was, came from her interest in him. Hadn't she said that she cared for him a great deal?

But he didn't answer her question—and only sat, his head in his hands, trying to be loyal to the woman who had been disloyal to him. He looked up at Tommy who had sunk in the chair before him and the eyes that were turned upon him were gentle, so gentle that he forgot the terrible indictment of Josie that she had just uttered and only thought of the impulses of friendship that had made her fly to his defense. It was good to have a friend like that. She had always been his friend. The friendship of a woman of her direct sort was rather a splendid thing to count on. And he—from the first had been drawn to her, a dull color toward its bright complementary. It had seemed strange to him from the beginning that creatures so different could reach such harmony. He glanced at her uneasily at last and then looked away, for he recalled the picture of Josie splashing water about in the canoe and saying rotten things about Tommy. It was curious that Josie's phrase should come back to him at this moment. "She's keen about you, all right—damn little fool." He tried to put it out of his mind with the decision that such an absurdity deserved, but when he glanced at Tommy again there were Tommy's eyes still looking at him. He felt her pity for him, the affection that she had not minded confessing a moment ago. She had been frank enough about that, so frank that it seemed a matter of course, the affection one had, and mentioned or not, as one chose. But something in the look in Tommy's eyes stirred Peter deeply—something that gave to their relationship a meaning that it had never had before. He could not be angry with her no matter what she said. He looked up at her, smiling.

"You didn't love her, did you, Peter?" she asked again.

"No, I didn't, Tommy," he said, slowly. "You knew that. I told you."

She laughed. "Well, you don't mind telling me again, do you?"

"No. But it doesn't make much difference whether I loved her or not."

"Yes, Peter, it does. If you'd cared for the woman, what I've said to you would have been impossible. You gave her your name. You thought you could save her. But you couldn't do that. You can't now. You've thrown your life away upon a mad fancy—a dream. It was your life to do what you wanted with. But there's something else you've no right to throw away—something that can't belong to Josie Brant, or to any one like her—something that's as much a part of you as the blood of your heart and yet belongs to others too—I mean your work, Peter—your career!"

"My work!" Peter rose and paced the floor. "Yes, my work," he muttered, savagely. "Nothing is going to interfere with my work!"

She glanced up at him quickly.

"You mean that?"

"Yes, yes. I mean it. I'm going to paint great things." He tapped his forehead. "They're here—they're in here. And they've got to come out. I'm working on some big canvases now and I've got them going. I've just found out that I can't express big thoughts unless I put them in a big way. I wonder why I didn't discover that before. I'm on the right track now and, by God, I'll stick to it, if I starve."

"And you're not going to let anything interfere?" she persisted.

"No."

"Not even—Josie Brant?"

He turned around slowly and stared at her as though she had injected a new element into their conversation.

"Josie!" he gasped, his gaze falling, aware that he had forgotten her.

"Yes, Josie! You've got to choose, Peter. You can't paint beautiful emotions with rotten ones in your heart. You can't think fine thoughts unless you can rise above the ugly ones. I know. I went through that shadow. I made mistakes just as you have, but I don't make them any more. I had my madness. You've had your dream. But you're awake now, you've got to carry on. You can't let anything—even a wife—stand in the way of that."

He walked the length of the room and stopped.

"I've got to make her go back," he muttered somberly. "I've got to."

"She won't go back."

"Perhaps. But I've got to hear her say so. I've got to—to—"

Peter paused and stood staring. Aroused by the lapse in his words she looked up at him quickly, aware that she had forgotten to close the door into her dressing room and that Peter's gaze was focused on his own picture that she had bought, "Afternoon Sunlight—Delaware River," on the wall of the room beyond.

She frowned in vexation, reviling herself for her stupidity in not having closed the door.

He turned toward her as she rose. His eyes had in them the look of a startled child.

"It was you—who bought my picture—" he said.

"Yes, Peter. I wanted something of yours—to re-

member you by." And then she added in a happy after-thought, "I've got a Wingate, too."

"I might have—have guessed it. You bought it out of friendship, Tommy," he said in a low, strained voice. And then gave a laugh. "And I thought all the while, that—some stranger—some lover of art—"

"Does it disappoint you that your friends should love the things that you paint?" she said gently, her fingers on his arm.

"No—" he stammered. "No—only—" He put his hand over hers and held it while he tried to ask another question.

"And you—you bought the—the other one too—the one Lablache just sold."

"No, I didn't, Peter. I swear it."

She put a hand on his shoulder and made him look at her. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, I—I do."

"Some one else bought it, Peter. But they'd have to care for it a lot to make it worth more to them than mine is worth to me."

Her eyes were shining, bright with emotion.

In a rush, the consciousness of her nearness came to him, a calm wonder as at some new beautiful revelation of color in river, hill and sky—late afternoon, looking into the cool of the east. . . . A pervading tenderness touched with melancholy, the sun far behind them, burning the hot hills. Her face was raised to his. He bent his head. He wanted to kiss her on the brow in thankfulness, but her lips were convenient. She gave them frankly, and he held her for a moment. Then she laughed a little and wanted to draw away.

"Tommy, dear," he whispered, "how did this happen?"

She had been kissed before, but the look of wonder that she saw in his eyes was a reflection of what was in her own. A wonder, a quite unreasoning wonder like his.

She had an impulse in defense.

"It was just a kiss, Peter."

"Yes—but—"

"It was just a natural thing to do."

"Yes—natural—as though I'd done it always. You wanted me to?"

"I guess so. It just happened—"

Peter made it happen again.

"Tommy, dear, have you thought of me like this before?"

"I must have, I suppose. But I didn't know. . . . One can't tell about such things."

"You—you care for me this much?"

Her silence gave assent.

"And you?"

"Yes, yes. I've always wanted you—needed you. I wonder why I didn't know, didn't dare—"

"What, Peter?"

"To dream this instead of—of that."

She moved a little in his arms.

"Oh, Peter, why didn't you?"

"God knows," he muttered. "Everything is all wrong with me."

She touched his forehead with her lips.

"I'll take half of that. Everything is all wrong with us both, then."

She drew away from him gently and he bent his head. A long silence full of the joy and misery of the awakening.

There seemed no doubt about it all. Peter's silence was deep with wonder and dismay. Tommy's more poignant—and more constructive.

"It's come too late, for us both, my dear," she said calmly. "Sit down again. . . . We've got to think this out. . . ."

She paced the floor slowly. The contact with this man had set strange spiritual forces moving within her. The touch of his hands had seemed like a benison; the tenderness of his kiss, a sacrament. It shamed her that she had ever thought of such things otherwise. The look that she had seen in his eyes—the look of wonder as if at the sudden disclosure of a miracle had given her a true vision of the new clean lights that were burning in Peter's spirit and in her own. It was curious—too—that she seemed to see, almost at once, and differently, the facts that related to them. A moment ago, as his friend, she had been reviling Josie Brant, warning him against her, almost pleading with him to let her go her way. Now she seemed to be thinking of all things in a different capacity, as some one nearer to Peter, as some one almost Peter himself, seeing with Peter's vision (as fatuous as his, it seemed) his obligation to this woman he had made his wife. The marriage at which she had scoffed had become cruelly definite.

Peter sat, his head in his hands, facing in desperation the results of his folly. . . . She spoke gently.

"Oh, Peter dear! Your marriage. It didn't mean anything to me. But there it is. Josie Brant between us. There's nothing to be done."

Peter moved a hand ineffectually.

Tommy turned in the desperateness of a final decision.

"A while ago I—I told you to let her go. That was

wrong. I've got to be right now just as you are right. You've got to go on. You've got to find her."

"Yes, I know—I know—"

"And nothing is different with us, Peter. Yes—different . . . only it's friendship magnified. That's what it is. You've kissed me. I've kissed other men. I never knew that the kisses I wasted were all yours, dear."

"I have no right to them," he said, miserably.

"Then no man has." She bent over him. He groped for her fingers and held them.

"I can't ask that of you, Tommy."

"You can't prevent my waiting."

"But there may be no end. . . . God knows what. . . ."

He got up slowly, like a man struggling against the years.

"I'll wait, Peter. I'll be here. I want no one else."

She let him take her in his arms for a long silent moment. And then she whispered, "I believe in you, Peter. I know you're going to do great things. Because you've got a soul that sees beauty—that even hopes for beauty in ugliness. You're going to paint so that people will see only the beauty that you see. You've made me see it. And people with only ugliness in their lives will want to buy your pictures just as I want to buy them." She gave a little gasp of happiness. "Oh, my dear! If you'd only let me buy them all!"

Peter straightened and drew away.

"Tommy!" he muttered. "That's all wrong. You can't buy any more of my pictures. . . ."

"Yes . . . I see. I won't, Peter."

"You promise. . . ."

"Yes, I promise."

He held her fast in another moment of forgetfulness. It was Tommy who first awoke. She relinquished him firmly.

"There must be—no more of this," she murmured. "It means too much. When you come here again, everything must be different. You must go now. You must go—" she spoke with difficulty. "Go and find her. I'm trying to see more clearly. Take her back with you to Red Bridge if she'll go. But whether she goes or not, you've got your work to do. Nothing must stop that. Good-by, Peter, and good luck."

She kissed him again, then pushed him away from her. He stared at her dumbly for a moment, then fled in a fury of haste.

CHAPTER XIV

A NIGHT ESCAPE

1

PETER seemed to have immediate need for muscular exertion to clear his mental vision. The thought of waiting for an elevator was intolerable, the thought of the smug-faced people he might see in one, more so. He found the stairway and went down it rapidly, eight flights, reaching the street and the immunity of the crowds. His steps turned instinctively toward the Park, where there were open spaces, trees, and a serene sky to give him some sort of a reasonable philosophy in which to debate his situation.

His most conspicuous emotion was one of profound amazement at the revelation of Tommy's love. And with this, the other astonishment that he had failed all these months to realize the strength of the bond that held him to Tommy. For many reasons he had not dared to think of her familiarly—indeed, he had never been accustomed to thinking of love of women in any terms, or love of Tommy Keith as one of the possibilities of his existence. Their relationship, he had taken pains to assure himself, was only one of perfect friendly accord, resulting from useful services each had done for the other. But he knew now that he had purposely deceived himself, that he had cared for her always, from the first hour of interest in her personality at Jimmy Blake's studio, from the moments of his first strange visit to the Ritz.

Even now there was a curious air of unreality about the events of the last hour. It would not have been difficult, except for certain mere sensory appreciations, to believe that the affair with Tommy had not taken place at all. But, there were her kisses still warm upon his mouth, the dark mirror of her eyes in which he had seen so true a vision of their union, the warm clasp of her body, slender like Josie's, but vital, splendidly vital with the forces of an unselfish love come to maturity. These were the tokens he could not doubt, the beacons that had called forth from the hidden places in his spirit the love that had lain hidden there. And he knew now from his need of her at the moment how much he had needed her always.

He took a path that led toward the reservoir. It was dusk. The sky line grew dim and faded into grays of green and violet. Singly, then in groups, came points of light, stippled above and through the velvet masses of foliage. Peter took a path toward the reservoir, seeking a height, a little nearer the stars, for the stars were always helpful. He climbed to the deserted platform and leaned against the wall, looking out upon the water, which ruffled gently in the breeze, sending him in tiny facets of dim light, cool remembrances of the afterglow. All about him the city roared, a sea beating against a coast it could not conquer.

Somewhere, there, to the southward, where the lights were brightest was Josie. As Peter took out his pipe and filled it, he had an ignoble moment, a reckless moment that challenged duty, honor and every righteous impulse to restitution that had brought him to find her. It would be so easy, so practicable to leave Josie where she was in the midst of the life that she wanted. Her end to Peter's

imagination was inevitable—another man, other men, providing definite excuses for his freedom. There would be no one to save her. Danger would stalk less ominously, vice grow more alluring with each repetition until . . . lower levels. . . .

The stars emerged and the breeze fanned his cheek. There seemed to come a brief lull in the roar of traffic that he might think more clearly. And the vision that came to him was the one of Josie, lying in the hospital bed, the color of pale jade . . . the bones at her wrists . . . her faded gaze. . . . Thus he summoned pity to blot out the other emotion that was still warm at his heart. Pity and a sense of his own shortcomings. This was the woman he had seized in violence, bruising her frail flesh with his hard brown fingers. And her white throat had been so close—so vulnerable. His objection to her seemed suddenly to be measured again in terms of his fury. He owed her much. He thought less of his vows of marriage than of the obligations of his failures. He had no right to happiness—while Josie was out there, the refugee from his insufficiency and brutality. No right to happiness. . . .

But what of Tommy! She had given herself to him knowing everything, but she had seen his duty at last with a vision that was even clearer than his own. He understood, and the thought uplifted him, for he knew that what had happened to them both was too fine to be defiled by any mental dishonesty. He had seen in Tommy's eyes, as though she had made a sudden discovery of some portentous, unrevealed fact of life, the inspiration to sacrifice. It had been strange to see that look dawning as the great moment of relinquishment had come to her. He had always known that she suffered from the deficiencies of her

good fortune, but that she was a creature capable of great moments, a woman who might sin splendidly and suffer for it without regret. But he had not known of the stoic calm that could be born in her hour of exaltation. She wanted him, but she wanted him clean . . . this was the new kind of love that had come to Tommy Keith. Peter needed no prompting. It was the kind of love that he meant to give her.

He knocked out his pipe against the parapet and went down the steps toward the roar of the city to the southward. His problem, spiritually mastered, still remained a problem. For how to find his wife among five million and against her will was more than he was able to determine. The addresses that he possessed having failed, there seemed nothing short of chance and continued inquiry to aid him. But he made his way toward Broadway with a new resolution to go over the ground already traversed. He had been to the Undine Theater, inquiring of the ticket seller and the doorman, neither of whom even knew Josie's name. It occurred to Peter suddenly now that in his abstraction he might have asked for Josie Randle—a stupid thing to have done, but not improbable. So he went there again for more exhaustive inquiries.

There was a queue of people at the ticket window, so he waited a more opportune moment, pacing slowly up and down near by, scrutinizing those who passed him. This wouldn't do. Impatience was consuming him. Suddenly, as a thought came, he went inside the lobby and asked the doorman where the manager of the theater was to be found. It was not the doorman he had questioned early in the afternoon. The information was given readily, and a door at one side indicated. He entered and stated his

errand, giving the name under which Josie had previously been employed. The man, of course, remembered her. "Little brunette with almond eyes—lost her job through illness. Yes, she'd been back again, less than a week ago. Offered her a job as usher, but she wouldn't take it. Said she might come in again."

Peter asked if she had left an address. The man took out a notebook and looked over some pages. Yes, here it was—Josephine Brant, care of Ellen McGovern, Moscow Apartments, next to the corner of Third Avenue—

It was one of the addresses that Peter had already visited. He thanked the man and went out into Broadway. If Josie was at the Moscow Apartments he had already received complete assurances that she did not want to see him. For it was from Ellen McGovern's apartment that Peter had come before he had met Tommy. From the nature of her replies to his questions he had suspected that Miss McGovern knew more than she had been willing to tell. But her rebuff had been effectual. Peter hadn't seen how he could force the truth from this woman if she didn't want to tell it. He hadn't been deeply impressed by her amiability. She was loud, slangy, and wore a kimono thrown over her shoulders, talking rapidly through the half-opened door, which she had closed in his face. And Josie was there, for this address proved it, had perhaps even been in the apartment while Peter questioned.

Well, he would have to see Josie. She would have to listen to him while he said what he had to say. It was not probable that Josie would be in at this time in the evening, for it was already nine o'clock, so he went into a quick lunch restaurant and ate.

Then he took a cross-town car at Thirty-fourth Street toward his destination, a region of small tradesmen and small apartments whose red brick façades were made still more ugly by iron fire escapes. The building in which the McGovern woman lived missed being a tenement by the grace of a name and a pair of brownstone steps with a weather-eaten balustrade. But night, though obliterating some of the ugliness of the neighborhood, had in other respects made it more forbidding. For the faces of those who passed were foreign, and the lights in the shop windows painted deep shadows into features seared with the marks of desperate living, of struggle against poverty and disease. Open windows on the side street disclosed slatterns in soiled kimonos, bawling children, talking machines, men in shirt-sleeves reading newspapers. An odor of stale grease and garbage—overhead the “L” roared. These were Josie’s neighbors, her surroundings. Peter gave thought for a moment to the peace of his island, with its clean air, its smell of young green things growing, the gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze, the river gray-blue in the calm starlight, and he wondered how Josie could be willing to relinquish that for this—even as a place to sleep. She could live here that she might be somewhere near the lights, the gay music, the turmoil that she craved—Broadway!

Peter had decided to make a preliminary investigation and entering the building went up the steps to the door where he had been so inhospitably received. A gas light burned dimly on the landing, but there was no sound from the McGovern apartment. He listened for a moment and then knocked. There was no reply. He tested the knob and found that the door was locked. So he went down

upon the avenue and lighting his pipe walked up and down, keeping watch upon the doorway. People went in and out, both men and women, but no one that looked in the least like Josie. Assured now that he was an unwelcome visitor, Peter chose a position where he could remain unobserved, pulled his hatbrim over his eyes and settled himself for a long siege. After a while a policeman came and questioned him, and Peter with an inspiration that saved him some trouble, told the truth—that he was waiting to see his wife. Peter's quiet manner and voice were reassuring and the patrolman went on.

Shutters were closed, lights went out, young couples passed, arm in arm, returning from the picture shows, a postman with his key and bag went his night round, trucks with merchandise lumbered up and down, taxis darted here and there. Twelve—one o'clock. The foot passengers were fewer and it was easier to keep watch upon the doorway. The night grew chill and Peter wished that he had brought an overcoat. He paced up and down again, his hands in his pockets. There was time to think of many things, but conflicting as his thoughts were of duty and desire, he did not for a moment relinquish the aim that had brought him here. And it was pleasant to him to believe that Tommy was there just at his elbow telling him that what he was doing was right.

At half past one an automobile stopped at the door and several people got out, but Josie was not one of them. He recognized the loud voice of the McGovern woman and saw her go indoors with her friends. For an instant he was tempted to speak to her, but the moment passed. For he was reminded that she would be no more disposed to tell him the truth now than in the afternoon. He listened to

the diminishing voices, the closing doors, wondering whether, after all, he was not on a false scent.

He was tempted to go to his hotel to bed. He was very tired and his shoulders ached with the cold. Ethically and in all reason, he had done what he could. But he did not go.

According to Peter's watch it was a quarter past two. He had crossed the street seeking a spot sheltered from the breeze when a taxi drew up at the curb before the Moscow Apartments. Peter turned and went back, reaching the vehicle just as a man got out upon the sidewalk. The arc light on the corner showed Peter the face of John Salazar. Salazar and Peter's wife!

Peter's hatbrim was turned down, his back was toward the light and they did not recognize him. But as he strode forward Salazar turned, just as Peter caught him roughly by the shoulder. It was Josie who recognized the intruder first and gasped Peter's name.

Peter's language was no more choice than his thoughts.

"Salazar, you dirty beast," he growled. "What are you doing with my wife?"

Salazar dodged Peter's blow. Then after a startled look, reminiscent of a previous incident, jerked away and ran. He was, it seemed, aware of the old adage, and for the present had tasted enough of Peter's medicine. Peter lumbered a few steps after him and then, at sounds behind him turned to see Josie trying to reach the doorway of the apartment house where the chauffeur had caught her by the wrist.

"Tryin' to beat a fare, were you? He didn't pay me. Come across now—three dollars!"

Peter brought out a roll of bills from his pocket.

"Wait a moment," he said, "I'll pay." But he took a strategic position between the doorway and Josie, who stood with frightened eyes staring as at the ghost of her sin. The look that she had once seen in Peter's eyes, the horror of his furious grasp were reflected in her attitude. Peter was grim but calm.

"It's all right, driver. There's ten. That's all right, isn't it?" And then, with a look at Josie— "This lady is going with me."

Josie by this time had gathered her scattered faculties into some sort of order.

"Who said I was going with you?" she asked, sullenly. Peter took her by the elbow.

"Get in the taxi," he said, quietly.

There had been a time when she misunderstood Peter's quiet tones. She didn't now. They had a meaning that was unmistakable. She felt the increasing pressure of his fingers on her arm.

"Get in the taxi, Josie," he repeated, more quietly.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked.

"Away from here."

She stumbled to the vehicle and Peter got in after her.

The chauffeur may have had some doubts as to the legality of this abduction, but he was a hardened hawk, accustomed to strange happenings among the wanderers of the night, and the bill that Peter had handed him produced an agreeable impression.

"Where to now?" he asked.

"Red Bridge," replied Peter, in a moment of abstraction.

"Where the hell's that?"

"Oh—why, it's on the Delaware, about thirty miles above Trenton."

"Trenton!" The man turned from his wheel, thrusting his head in at the front window. "Trenton! What d'ye think this is? The Pennsylvania Railroad? You're not joking?"

"No, I'm not joking."

"Well, it'll cost you fifty bucks and the gas."

Peter took out his bank notes and produced five tens.

"All right, here you are. Get us there in time for breakfast and I'll make it a hundred." There was a magnificence in Peter's prodigality that made Josie stare.

The man counted the bills and put them in his pocket, grinning.

"Right-o," he said, "you're on. I'd drive you to Palm Beach for that."

There was an energetic jerk of gears and the machine went westward at a high speed. Peter sat staring straight before him; Josie rigid, silent. They might have been a belated couple suffering the final consequences of theater and supper. But Peter was thinking with a mind that seemed to visualize all things crystal clear.

So this was Salazar's revenge! A beautiful one and quite complete, for Josie was no longer a mere ticket seller and any man's quarry, but a person who bore the respectable name of the enemy who had struck him down beside an ash can in an alley where many people had come to look and see. A vengeance quite suited to such an ignominy. Peter's fists closed hard. His face must have looked rather fierce to Josie, for she shrank further into her corner and made no sound.

For the moment Peter had won. It wasn't so much the

victory of finding Josie as the assurance that he had found himself. He had found merely Josie's body (such as it was), but he had discovered his own immortal soul, and committed himself without reservation, when reservations had been easy, to do his duty to this woman instead of following the desire of his heart. There was a sense of futility about the whole business, however, a clamor of unused forces wasting themselves tremendously over a matter that was not to be mended. But there Josie was beside him—at least there was the husk that he had sworn to protect. He knew that her mind, her reasoning faculties, the sense of right and wrong, conscience, the duties of self-respect and decency had evaded him, that her body was an empty possession. And yet he meant to take it home, for this was what he had set out to do. He was a little uncertain as to what he intended to do with it, for relations, difficult before, could be no less difficult now. Difficult. . . . Impossible! It was a different world. Pity only was left. He would try to give her that.

She moved nervously beside him, summoning some courage.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"I'm going to take you home, Josie," Peter replied, calmly.

"Well, I don't want to go," she said with an air of bravado. "You haven't got any rights to me now after what happened. No woman has to stay with a man who starves her, beats her."

Peter bent his head, but said nothing and Josie went on.

"You've got no right to take me anywhere I don't want to go."

"Yes. I've got a right to take you home," he said,

dully. "That's where you're going, Josie." His voice was still quiet, but there seemed to be a very definite meaning now in everything he said. She realized that he was not to be trifled with and sank back into her corner again.

"I—I'm tired," she said in a kind of sob.

"Are you? Perhaps you can go to sleep."

"In this thing? My God!" She began weeping, noisily. "I don't want—to go to Red Bridge. You can't keep me there after—after what you did, beating me—and all."

"I'm sorry for that," Peter said, politely. "Very sorry."

"Sorry!" she sobbed, ironically. "Sorry! Then let me out of here."

"No."

"You're crazy. I'm not going to drive all night with a lunatic. Let me out of here."

She put her hand on the door catch, but Peter caught her firmly and drew her back to her seat. She was really frightened at that and huddled into her corner sobbing more violently.

"We've got to make another start, Josie," Peter was saying, slowly. "We've got to try to get along somehow. You won't starve—and I—I will be very kind to you. I don't think there'll be any more trouble about money. I've sold another picture and I expect to sell some more. I'll give you anything you want—in reason." He was speaking like an automaton, very quietly, as though by his own gravity he might overcome his sense of the inefficacy of his persuasions. Josie did not move or give any sign that she had heard him, so he put his position more definitely. "But you've got to come with me whether you want to or

not. I can't have you living here—like this. It's lucky Salazar ran away. I might have killed him. He's made a fool of you again. We won't say anything more about that. We'll just forget it. . . . You'd better stop crying now. You'll just tire yourself out."

If she had had a hope that the old device might have been effective, she relinquished it at last and straightened. "How I hate you!" she stammered.

"Do you? Do you really? Well, that's too bad. I don't hate you. It's rather funny, too, I suppose I ought to."

She stared at his bent profile but said nothing. They crossed the ferry in silence. If she had any thought of escape she must have given it up, and as they reached the Jersey shore and went upon their way she seemed to have fallen asleep. Peter drew the robe about them. The driver of the taxi knew the road and Peter watched the gray ribbon wind in as on a reel. He was very tired, the sense of warmth was agreeable. He had had a long day and presently he dozed—then slept soundly.

A creaking of brakes awoke him. There were lights of a night service station, revealing the fact that the seat beside him was empty. For Josie had disappeared.

2

In considering his situation the next day Peter came to several important conclusions. The first conclusion that he reached was that the mere regaining of Josie's body had signified nothing, for the part of her that Peter had been trying to regain had long since vanished into the shadows from which it had come. Therefore, the fact that he had

not been able to find her in his night long search of the roads was merely a kind of physical corroboration of an abstract idea that had long been puzzling him. The desperation that had driven Josie from the taxi in the dead of night to escape him was a measure of the futility of his errand.

Peter had at first been angry—more at himself than at the taxi driver who showed an innocent concern and astonishment at the disaster. He had slowed down, he said, several times, had stopped once to adjust a bulb that had worked loose in one of the headlights, but he hadn't looked into the car. But he lent himself without stint to Peter's efforts to find the lady and they reached the ferry at daylight rather weary and the worse for wear.

There was nothing to be done. Peter had lost Josie, irretrievably this time. Had he been possessed of the calm philosophy of the practiced man of the world, he would have gone upon his way, if not rejoicing, at least with a sense that he had done all that he could to save his wife and thanking God that he was well rid of her. But Peter couldn't dismiss his obligations in so careless a fashion. He had had some fine moments, noble moments of renunciation, and the events of the night had taken something from their dignity. He felt a good deal like the soldier who has successfully stormed a fortress to find only dummy guns and the enemy with colors flying retreating to a better defensive position.

The second conclusion that Peter reached was that, having failed, there was nothing left but to go back to Red Bridge alone. This conclusion was only reached after a long period of thought. It occurred to him that he might employ a detective to try and find Josie again.

But to what end? Another scene? Another escape? Had she not said that she hated him? He rejected the idea at last, rejected also a plan to find Salazar and give him another thrashing—an affair that might end in the police court and wash his dirty linen in public.

No. For the present, at least, there seemed nothing to be done. He paced his hotel room like an unquiet beast. There by his elbow at every turn was the telephone. At the other end of the wire was the Ritz and Tommy. He wanted to hear the sound of her voice, to see her, to tell her all the things that had come into his mind about the strange happening that had befallen them both, to have her assurance that it hadn't all been a mistake. Instead, in a desperate hurry, lest he should recant, he began throwing his clothing into a bag. He would write her. It would be safer. That night, late, he reached Red Bridge.

CHAPTER XV

THE PASSING YEAR

1

PETER'S letter to Tommy covered eighteen pages, and written from the sanctuary of the island, contained all that seemed necessary to establish his happy and unfortunate relationship to her in definite terms. Peter had never been much of a hand at writing letters, but what he wrote was satisfactory to Tommy, who thought it very beautiful. An idealist who has at last found his mission may be safely trusted to express himself in comprehensive terms to the object of his affection. Peter was no sentimentalist and there was a kind of awkward gravity in his phrases that was very like Peter himself. He expressed a continuing wonder at the miracle that had happened to them both, but confirmed, to Tommy's satisfaction, his own share in the revelation. He told her why he had returned to Red Bridge without attempting to see her, and of his fear that he needed time to adjust himself to an emotion which might be disastrous to his peace of mind and hers. He wrote her that when he next came to New York he would be prepared to visit her in a spirit of resignation to her wishes and their unfortunate position. (Her wishes!) He told her of the finding of Josie and of her escape, blaming himself bitterly for his failure. "And yet," he said, "I don't just see what else I could do. It was like trying to cage a moth in chicken wire. Her wings

are singed already, and yet she still flies about the flame. God knows what the end is to be! I want to help her. But there's no way. Perhaps she'll need me some day. Then I'll have to help her, Tommy. I wouldn't be worthy of you if I didn't."

It was all, of course, very hopeless to Tommy, but since Peter's flight after their moment of communion she had had time, like Peter, to do a great deal of thinking. But, unlike Peter, she was less amazed at the sudden declaration of her love than at the curious change that had come in her own viewpoint on Peter's obligations to his wife and their own obligations to each other.

Tommy had never been one to toy with the affections of other women's husbands. There had always been enough men in the world without that. Perhaps she had merely disliked the idea of a divided possession. Perhaps, as a good sporting proposition, she had decided always to play fair. One of Irma's husbands had been quite mad about her, but she had "given him the gate," as Lola had so aptly expressed it, when Tommy discovered that his attentions passed the outward boundaries of comradeship. These were, perhaps, merely ethical considerations. If she had fallen in love with any of Irma's husbands, as she had fallen in love with Peter, there might have been a chance that she could have invented a new code of ethics to conform to the situation, liberating the complaisant Irma and thus attaining without great difficulty the object of her affection. But she hadn't fallen in love with any of Irma's husbands and she *had* fallen in love with Peter Randle. There was a difference, even though Peter's wife was a woman that she despised, a woman who had never been worthy of Peter's fine intentions, and was now an outcast

again from Peter's excellent society. Among the people of Tommy's set who invented new codes of morals as fast as they were needed to condone their peccadillos, such a marriage as Peter's to such a creature would have been given short shrift in a general consideration of the social aspects of the affair. A year ago, six months ago even, Tommy would have thrown herself into Peter's arms for better or for worse, marriage or no marriage. She recalled now in curiosity at the change in her attitude, that before Peter had taken her in his arms she had been advising him to let Josie Brant go to the devil in her own way so that he might go back to Red Bridge and paint great pictures.

But with Peter's arms around her, some strange alchemy had been at work within her. With their union, the finest spiritual contact that Tommy had ever known, she had seemed suddenly and mysteriously fused into his personality, permeated with his philosophy, touched to the core by the magic of his idealism. All things that mattered most to Peter, seemed to matter most to her—self-respect, honor, duty and all the other attributes that Tommy's crowd had long since cast into the discard. She learned at that moment that there were finer things in the world than just having what you wanted when you wanted it. She wanted Peter Randle for her own. He was, curiously enough, everything that she was not, her other half, the completion of herself. She wanted him, too, because he needed her, and she had proved it. Peter, too, had been a rock that she had once clung to. He was more than an interest that she had turned to when everything else had failed. He was her creature, and she loved him with the generosity of a tenderness that had been waiting to be

called on—the tenderness that comes to some women often, but to other women just once. . . .

She didn't see exactly how she was going to get along without him. So she sat and wrote him a letter telling him so. It was a long letter, frequently underlined, and connoted a devotion no less fervent than his own. She told him among other less important things that she wanted him now more than she had ever wanted anything in her *life*; that she wanted him to have on record by her own handwriting, that she would wait for him FOREVER. Nothing would make any difference, nothing would change her. She had seen specimens of all the men that were to be had in the world and she wanted Peter to the exclusion of all others. As to Josie, she said little. Peter had done his duty. Josie Brant was, of course, impossible.

In concluding, she wrote: "It is, of course, all very difficult for us, Peter dear. I'm glad you went back to Red Bridge instead of coming to the Ritz or even 'phoning, because I don't think I should have been strong enough then to keep my resolution and help you to keep yours. But I've had time to think now and to understand just what we've both got to do. You're to go on painting fine pictures. I'm to go on—well, just trying to be a little more useful in the world if I can. When we meet again I shall be very cool, very dignified and polite. Perhaps you shall hold my hand. I haven't decided. And you shall sit in the big chair with a lot of cushions and smoke your smelly pipe and tell me all about the things you've been doing. But we *must meet*, Peter. I can't get along without seeing you again. I *want* you to do your duty. I've got to help you to do that whatever it costs. It's already cost something. I never counted the cost of anything in

my life. I know now that things one wants most can't sometimes be had at *any* price. But I'm trying to understand many other things—but mostly that our love—yours and mine—could never be the beautiful thing that it is—if we let it be dishonorable.

“Oh, I shall be so strong when I see you, dear. You shall come to see me when you come to New York and everything will be the way it was—almost, but not quite. But you will be strong, too, and that will help me to be. And don't let it be too long. Because if you don't come *here* before a great while, I shall be going to *Red Bridge* and of course that would be scandalous!”

To one accustomed, in her social relations, to the almost exclusive use of the telephone, Tommy's letter was something of an achievement and she read it over rather surprised at the ease of her pen, which it seemed could have run on forever. But after she had mailed the letter, she ordered her runabout and took a long drive into the country, alone, for this was the one diversion that could be suited to all of her moods. She had found a new taste for the beauties of the hills, the trees and the skies, trying to see them, as Peter saw them, translated into terms of color and light and air. They were Peter's skies. Somewhere over there he was painting them. He was working hard. She knew that. And soon she would hear from Fred Wingate that he had produced something that even Wingate might be proud of. But different from anything Wingate did—the thing that Peter saw plus something of the love of beauty, the idealism that Peter had within himself.

She wanted to help him. As she had said in her supreme moment of weakness, she would have liked to buy them all.

But, of course, that wouldn't have helped Peter to be what he wanted to be. No amount of money that she could spend would make Peter paint better pictures. The look of dismay that she had seen in his eyes when he had discovered that she was the owner of the first picture that he had sold came back to her. She had promised him not to buy any more of his pictures. But there must be other things that she could do to help him on his way.

Suddenly, she recalled some of Fred Wingate's phrases about the career of the painter—Wingate, who had tasted most of the bitter ironies of his profession before he had become the vogue. There were a lot of good painters—better painters than Peter—who couldn't make their salt. There were paintings that people bought and other paintings that they didn't buy. But if there were good paintings that people didn't buy, what was the reason? Tommy didn't know very much about Peter's profession, but she was sure that she would have liked "Afternoon Sunlight—Delaware River" even if some one else had painted it. And Wingate's increasing respect for Peter's talents was altogether reassuring. Other things being equal, then, there was no reason why Peter's pictures shouldn't sell as well as those of another man with an equal talent. She knew that an artistic success was not just the making of money, for Wingate had insisted that there were artists who made a great deal of money who were not successful painters.

As she thought about the matter it seemed reasonable to Tommy that it was quite possible for a man to become an artistic success as well as a financial one. There was Wingate himself, for example. But Wingate hadn't been

a financial success until he was forty years of age. Why hadn't he been a financial success earlier in life? He had told her himself that some of his early canvases were better art than his later ones. But people hadn't bought them. He had not become the vogue until he had found a bellwether. "It takes a turn of fortune to make a man the vogue," Wingate had assured her. "Luck and a bellwether."

Tommy moved her car into a deserted country road and stopped the engine. The sudden silence seemed to put her more definitely in contact with her thoughts. She got out and paced slowly along a path among the grasses—a path that turned at an angle across a cow pasture toward a farmhouse and barn. The path was prophetic. It symbolized a plan that was growing in her mind—a short cut that avoided the longer way by road and lane. A short way avoiding the longer journey that Wingate had had to travel, that other artists were traveling with the goal not yet in sight. The thought in its beautiful simplicity was amazing. "Luck and a bellwether." If picture buyers were sheep, as Wingate had said, what they needed was a shepherd. If Peter's pictures were good enough to get into good exhibitions (and he had proved that), if two of them were so good that Lablache could sell them, there would be others so fine that other people would want to buy them. Tommy's logic seemed unassailable.

It was a pretty poor commentary on the taste of the picture collectors if they were so stupid that they had to wait until somebody should show them the way. They made a man a financial success just because somebody wiser than they "discovered" a painter and gave him publicity. It would be something more than amusing to play

the game in Peter's behalf. He would never try to make himself popular. He was much too serious, too conscientious for that. He had proved his honesty by refusing to repaint "Dawn on the Hills" just "for a few stinking dollars."

No, there was nothing to be expected in the way of propaganda or business initiative from Peter. And with no bellwether in sight it remained for somebody to find one. She had made no promises to Peter about not helping him. The scheme was worth trying. And what a triumph—what a sardonic triumph, what an ironic joke on the people who thought they knew all about modern pictures—if she succeeded!

She went back to her car with rapid steps and went bowling joyfully homeward. A methodical campaign of persistent and tactful infiltration. She would cultivate only those who could be useful to her. She would become a gallery-hound, a patroness of the arts, a highbrow—even this she would do for Peter. Already she was planning at a great rate. Jimmy Blake. He knew everybody—the post-impressionists, the futurists, the cubists, and just the plain painters. The names were already familiar to her though she didn't know what they meant, just words that Wingate and Peter mentioned, but they ran lightly through her mind. She would meet all different kinds of artists and their patrons and give them tea. But all the while her eyes would be set on bigger game—directors of art institutions, curators of galleries, collectors who couldn't afford to be without a good Randle in their galleries. Each one of them should be the discoverer of Peter Randle and each by reason of that discovery, a bellwether. Were there flaws in her plan? She could see

none. There were uses for her money of which she had never dreamed.

2

The change in Peter's attitude toward his work, already indicated, became during that spring and summer a definite condition of mind. In the larger canvases, he was finding himself. He was working with joy, a sure sense of his power. He no longer painted from his knuckles as Wingate once said he did, but with the strong free stroke that signified greater technical proficiency. He did not paint his larger canvases out of doors, but from sketches that were translations caught in fleeting moments, of the moods he sought. He had learned to believe that paintings of moods must be something more than literal renditions of what he saw before him. And while aware of the dangers of working from sketches which sometimes were inadequate in larger dimensions, he liked the cool north light, the studious quiet of the studio where the possibilities of the personal element did not suffer as under the more garish conditions of out of doors. Of course he made failures and scraped them out cheerfully, but he did four good canvases by midsummer.

He was, however, in fairly easy circumstances, for Lablache had sold another of his smaller things and Wingate stood ready to pat him on the back in encouragement or to hurl his thunderbolts of invective when Peter's work was below par. They didn't always agree and Peter, who had now discovered an artistic ego of his own, gave him back as good as Wingate sent. But they were fast friends—a brotherly relationship that was to continue

always. Peter, of course, said nothing of Tommy or indeed of Josie Brant, but Wingate had kept his eyes open and he knew more than he seemed to know of Peter's personal affairs.

It was near the end of July that Peter, now sufficiently fortified against the inevitable, had taken the train for New York with two of his new canvases. After the business at Lablache's gallery he entered Tommy's apartment at the Ritz with an eagerness slightly modified by his infelicitous air. But Tommy, in spite of the firm resolves expressed in her recent letters, stood poised for a moment at the door of her dressing room, and then with a joyous cry came rushing into his arms.

"Oh, Peter—you dear old thing! I'm so glad—so glad."

They kissed and then stood apart, hands clasped, regarding each other; Peter grinning like a schoolboy caught in a transgression, Tommy star-eyed. . . .

"How brown and well you're looking!" she said. "I don't believe you've missed me a minute—"

"Oh, say—Tommy!"

"*Have* you?"

He caught her in his arms again and she yielded. It was their moment. They deserved it. Tommy at last drew away.

"How stupid of us to think things could ever be any other way," she said with great solemnity. Peter sawed the air helplessly, but said nothing. She smiled and drew him to a chair. "You must sit here and tell me all about everything."

Peter frowned. "What's the use? Everything that really matters is right here."

She touched his brown hand. "I like to hear you say that—even if it isn't true."

His blue gaze was perturbed.

"I mean," she added, soberly, "the work you're doing, the work you've got to do."

"Yes—work," Peter muttered, slowly. "But that isn't all of life—I used to think it was. But—I've been thinking. I've stayed away as long as I could. I needed to see you such a lot."

"Yes, I know. But it was better so. Think how much gladder it makes you to see me now."

He bent his head. "Oh, it's all so hopeless! . . . I might divorce her, I suppose. But I can't do that, Tommy. I don't believe in divorce. I never have believed in it. There may be cases—but most divorce is just legalized prostitution. I went into this thing with my eyes wide open. I've got to stick. While there's a chance of Josie needing me, I've got to be ready to help her."

Tommy was silent. This point of view on marriage had never been given to her.

"You really believe all that, Peter?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Yes. I've always thought of marriage as a sacrament—an oath. If you make oaths in the marriage service or in anything else you've got to keep 'em. It wouldn't be honorable if you didn't. Most people just flop into marriage—and out. I can't do that. What you swear to is so definite—so painfully definite—so simply—but so damnably effective. Love—honor—cherish—death us do part. . . . They're just words, of course, but they're said with a purpose. I thought pity might be love. Honor? There was honor in Josie trying to be good. Cherish! I

swore to that. Don't you see? Good God! How hopeless it all is!"

"But Josie Brant—she's forfeited the right—" Tommy swallowed painfully, then rose and walked away from him to the window. She had a struggle there, but when she turned back her face was calm.

"Of course," she said, her voice uncertain, "I understand."

Peter went on. "I've been turning this thing back and forth in my mind, until I'm sick of thinking. Because the answer always comes out the same. I've got to stick to it. Oh, Tommy dear," he groaned, "what a fool I've been."

She smiled at him tenderly.

"Well, there's no use going over that."

"No, there isn't."

There was a silence as though each was aware of the futility of discussion. Then at last Tommy rose and walked the floor.

"Peter, I've never thought much about the obligations of marriage," she said quickly, "I might say that until recently I've never thought very seriously about anything. I've never had ideas like Irma's. I suppose she's rather disreputable. But it's hard for me to believe in the obligations you speak of. Of course, an oath is an oath, whether you swear it at the altar or at a garden party. But swearing it to cherish a woman when she won't let you cherish her is something else. How can you keep an oath like that? You can't help a woman who runs away from you. You can't love her, you can hardly even pity her. And as for honor— The whole thing is a lie, Peter, from beginning to end, a dreadful lie. She's given you up, thrown you over, dragged your good name

up and down Broadway—God knows what. You’ve done everything that you can do. You’ve squared the account of everything you owed her. You’ve got your own right to happiness. . . .”

Peter had risen and was staring at her with an air deeply perturbed. She was expressing in the simplest terms the thoughts that had come constantly to plague him—the enemies that he had resolutely dismissed.

She glanced at him and saw the puzzled frown, the air of abstraction. As many people had discovered, that air was one of the symptoms of an inflexible determination. His look startled and rebuked her, but she had already gone too far to recant. She was greatly disturbed again, for her love had consumed her reason.

“Don’t listen to me, Peter,” she cried. “Don’t listen. But I’ve got to talk. I’ve got to go on. I told you that when you came here I’d be calm and self-contained. But that was a lie and I think I must have known it was a lie when I wrote it. I can’t see you throwing away your life—my life, too—for this woman who is nothing to you—who wants to be rid of you. You married her out of pity. She’s forfeited the right even to that. No man has got to stay tied for life to a woman who dishonors him. The law recognizes that in New York—everywhere. You’ve got your rights and the law will respect them. You think there’s still a chance of your saving this woman. Well, you can’t. She isn’t the kind anybody can save. You’ve done your duty as you saw it. You tried an impossible experiment and you’ve failed. You’ve got your right to happiness, too. Everybody has.” She threw out her arms in a wild gesture. “Oh, Peter! It’s my heart that’s speaking to you. I don’t

know what it's said but what it wants to say is that you can't go on suffering forever just for one mistake. That isn't justice to you—or to me. . . .”

Peter had walked to the window staring out blankly, but as he turned back his face was seared with sober lines and his eyes peered from their shadows not at Tommy, but beyond her. His words breaking the brief silence, conveyed a sense of heavy weights.

“You mustn't talk like that, Tommy,” he said, slowly. “You've been saying some things . . . I shouldn't listen to. Perhaps, under other conditions. . . . But these are different—I hoped you understood. There may be some reasons for divorce. I don't know. But there are no reasons, no excuses for me that could justify what you advise.”

Tommy dropped into a chair and bent forward, her head in her arms, but she said nothing. His voice sank a note as though to attune itself to her gesture of despair.

“You want me clean, Tommy? You said so once. You saw things then as I saw them. For the love that came to us was so fine that we didn't want anything to tarnish it. I married Josie Brant; why, God knows! I was in a kind of fog of illusion. Perhaps, it wouldn't have come to that if those people had let me alone. I believed I was doing the right thing in giving her another chance. It didn't matter about me. I'd never thought of marrying. You seemed to belong to another world. Your friendship . . . well—that came from another world, too—a sort of patronage, half satirical, for one who'd done you a service. I hadn't even dared to dream of you. And yet all the while I must have been dreaming of you. And then. . . .” He halted and turned away.

Tommy stirred and raised her head.

"And then . . . ?"

"I—I came out of the fog," he muttered. "You were there—a reality to point back and show me how ghastly—my mistake. . . ."

"Oh, Peter! Why did you?"

He turned toward the window, muttering. "I've been a fool always—from the beginning. If there was any way of my doing the wrong thing I always found it. And yet I never learned anything. Mistakes don't cost very much when measured in terms of money. But I didn't know how terribly they could cost when measured in terms of love and happiness."

Tommy had risen and put her arms around his shoulders. He turned and held her silently for a moment.

"Let me finish, my dear. I've said I'd always been a fool. When I'm through you'll say I still am. But I can't help what I think and feel. If I thought and felt differently I wouldn't be myself, but some one else. All my love is yours—the things of the spirit," he whispered, "the tenderness of hope deferred, the dream of unfulfilled desire. . . ." He kissed her on the brow and then released her gently, turning away, "But I've given my life—God help me!—to Josie Brant; my will, my hands, my body. They belong to her. I swore to help her come back. That was my oath. That was what my marriage meant to me. If it meant it then it must mean the same thing now. I've still got to be ready to help her if she'll let me. And it isn't just the marriage, it's my resolve that you're challenging. I made it solemnly. What does it matter if she's failed me? I've not failed—I'm not dishonored as long as I'm true to myself, as long as I'm ready to

carry on. Don't you see, Tommy? There's only one thing that could dishonor me—letting her sink further and further into the mire while I deserted her for you—” His voice had sunk to a hoarse whisper. “Don't tempt me with yourself—because it's the one thing I want most in the world.”

He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. She stood above him uncertainly, torn between the softness of his rebuff and the pain of his abnegation. But she knew now that his self-control had been greater than hers, that his idealism was more honest than her worldliness. His suffering reproached her, she fell upon her knees beside him.

“Forgive me, Peter,” she whispered.

He smiled at her gently and kissed her hands.

“I thought I was strong enough,” she murmured, “but I'm not. It's you who are the stronger, after all. I'll try to help you to be honest with yourself. You could never be happy with me if you didn't do what you thought was right. I see, I understand. It was just a mad dream of mine, Peter, dear, and it's all over now.”

At last he lifted her to her feet and they stood for a moment of silence when a flash of humor from Tommy relieved the situation.

“You wouldn't think it immoral, Peter,” she said with a wry smile, “if I asked you to sit on the divan here and let me hold your hand?”

3

It will be observed that Peter's convictions in regard to their relationship were stronger than hers. There

was an enduring quality about his opinions that had many of the aspects of mere obstinacy and yet Tommy seemed to see again, for the moment, his duty and hers through Peter's eyes. There was in his attitude, she felt, a fanatic sense of devotion to a lost cause, but there was a fine solemnity about his folly that impressed her with the genuineness of his idealism.

After he had gone back to Red Bridge there was plenty of time to consider their meeting in the solitude of her thoughts. Most conspicuous was the fact that she had failed him. The first fine flush of courage and exaltation with which their bond had been sealed had yielded to the demands of her heart, which had only felt and could not reason. She had regained her magnanimity before he left, but she had had a sense of battling worthily against superior forces. It was curious, too, in spite of certain mental reservations not to be denied, that she cared more for Peter because of his high sense of obligation to his vows than if he had yielded to her worldliness. For it was this very quixotism that made Peter different from other men. There was, too, a lure, stronger than any she had ever known, in the obstacles to her happiness. Peter had never seemed more maddening or more lovable than in the moment when he had denied her. For she knew that he was desperately unhappy and that his decision had been wrenched from him at a cost no less great than her own.

If her moments of hopelessness as to the outcome of their affair were any gauge of her devotion she was surely very much in love. All her life Tommy's environment had taught her to think that love was a kind of game to be indulged in as the spirit moved one and she had now

discovered that it was something surprisingly different—more like a religion which had its moments of splendid repressions and silences, a state of being rather than a mere emotion. She wanted Peter to be honorable in his own eyes even though his ideas of honor might come perilously near the grotesque. It was extraordinary that she could have yielded at last so calmly to the insistence of Peter's code, for she was convinced that, like the famous Knight of La Mancha, he exemplified a chivalry that was destined to failure and unhappiness. But she wrote him a long letter, expressed with all the calmness of renunciation, renewing her vows of eternal faithfulness. It did not matter if the letter breathed between its lines the fervency of her devotion, for distance seemed to grant her that privilege, and of course, as she hoped, it made Peter very happy.

But an incident was to follow, a disturbing incident that gave her a new idea of the false position in which she had placed herself. For the affair of Tommy and Peter Randle, from being a private matter became, through an inadvertent remark of Lola Oliver's, a topic for the tea tables and studio parties of Tommy's crowd and was thus carried forth the length and breadth of Manhattan Island. For Tommy Keith, by reason of her wealth, was too important a person not to be talked about if there was any sort of a handle for gossip. But Lola Oliver, like most clever people who talk a great deal, could not resist the temptation of talking too much. So when Georgia Wellington asked her why Tommy was seen no more in the haunts to which she had been accustomed, Lola told her that Tommy had become a frequenter of picture galleries and exhibitions, cultivating the company

of collectors and dilettantes. She was really in love, quite properly and hopelessly, with Peter Randle the artist, a married man. Georgia remembered him vaguely as a wet-blanket at one of Jimmy Blake's studio parties and thought the whole thing most extraordinary. So extraordinary, in fact, that she repeated the news rather maliciously to John Salazar who had once paid Georgia some attentions before he had turned to Tommy Keith. Thus the information was sifted down through various social strata until it reached the ears of Josie Brant, who was immediately aware of opportunities for mischief on a large scale, for retribution and perhaps for profit.

Accordingly, one afternoon in September as Tommy came in from a drive, she was informed by her maid Lucette that Mrs. Peter Randle had called during her absence but that she would return between five and six, perhaps to find Miss Keith at home. Tommy frowned at the clock. It was after five already. Josie Brant! Why? She meant no good, of course, either to Peter or Tommy, and deserved only a contemptuous denial of admittance. This was Tommy's first thought. Her second was that it might be interesting to see in what way Peter's wife had changed. And between the two impulses curiosity won. She would see Josie Brant if only to reassure herself as to the woman's utter unworthiness and Peter's sacrificial chivalry.

She answered the telephone when the bell rang and in an ingratiating tone invited the visitor to her apartment. Women do these things exceedingly well, for the bitterness of death was behind Tommy's invitation. In such an interview, whatever it portended, Tommy would seem

to have some advantages in her own apartment, and she intended to make the most of them, preserving, for Peter's sake, an air of judicial calm that would rob the visitor of her sting—and learn at the small cost of an unpleasant half hour whatever might be useful for him to know of the woman's purposes and plans.

Lucette answered the bell and Tommy emerged almost at once from her dressing room, wearing the smile of the tight-rope-walker who finds in her precarious footing a melancholy pleasure. Josie, she noted at once, was attired in the very height of the fashion as viewed from the sidewalk at Times Square—a velvet hat with a touch of violent color, furs, a dress of black velvet, sheer silk stockings, gray suède slippers, earrings of French jewelry and white gloves, slightly soiled. Her complexion had been applied with an art beyond the reach of grace and she created in other respects an impression of being rather frail and rather desperate. Tommy indicated a chair and sat, now thoroughly assured that this unexpected visit could not have been made without a definite—possibly a malign—purpose. She also assured herself that in spite of the fine apparel (which Peter had not paid for), Josie Brant was even less attractive in her new plumage than when Tommy had last seen her on Peter's island at Red Bridge.

"It's very polite of you to see me, Miss Keith," Josie said, appraising the value of the entire room, including Tommy, in flitting glances.

"Delighted," Tommy said, coolly, and waited inquiringly.

"Well," Josie went on rapidly, "it seemed to me that as you and Peter were such friends, it would be all right

for me to come down to see you and—er—talk things over in a general sort of way.”

“Oh! What things had you in mind?”

“Well, of course, there’s no use in my telling you that Peter and I didn’t get along. You must know that. He didn’t make enough money and he treated me very badly.”

Tommy rose.

“If you’ve come here only to talk about Peter Randle you might as well go at once,” she said.

Josie gave a shrug that set her ear-pendants dancing.

“Oh, now, don’t get huffy. I didn’t really come here to complain about Peter, but I thought you might like to know my side of—”

“Well, I don’t want to know. If you’ve got anything in particular to talk about you’d better confine your remarks to that. Though I can’t imagine what—”

“I’ll come to that,” said Josie, coolly, “if you’ll just sit down again and give me a few moments.”

Already an idea of the purpose of the woman’s visit had come to Tommy, growing more definite under the impress of her vulgarity. But the curiosity that had opened Tommy’s doors had now become a sort of fascination which waited expectant of any vileness. Tommy, thinking of how she could serve Peter, sat upright on the edge of a chair and Josie went on.

“I don’t believe in wasting words when I’ve got anything to say. I didn’t come here to take afternoon tea or anything and I guess the sooner I’ve finished the better we’ll both be pleased.” Josie gave a staccato laugh and settled herself back in her chair more comfortably. “I said that Peter and I didn’t get along. Since it hurts your feelings I won’t tell you just what happened, but we

didn't get along and, of course, you know I've left him—for the present anyhow," she added with a narrow glance at Tommy's face.

"I don't see where all this is leading—"

"I'm coming to that. You and I didn't seem to hit it off very well. There was a reason—we won't go into that either. But it's a funny world and it's queer how things happen to some people. What I mean is, you and I, and Peter and Jack Salazar. You'd think there'd be enough men and women in the world without four people getting mixed up with each other the way we've been. Now don't get huffy again. You'd better listen to what I've got to say. It may be worth your while."

"Go on," said Tommy, hiding her contempt with difficulty.

"Well, everybody knows you and my husband are great friends and, of course, I know it. I guess you see something to him that I don't. You've always been rich and you don't have to bother about whether a man can make a living or not. But I do. I want a man who can give me three square meals a day and maybe cake on Sundays. I like to have nice clothes and a place where I can show them off. That's not asking too much of any man, is it?"

Tommy sat immovable, in a condition of fury well suppressed. Josie did not look at Tommy. Her glances each time were directed at a point to the left and slightly above Tommy's snug little "cloche" hat. But her impudence had all the convictions of courage.

"That's one of the reasons why I left my husband—only one of them, mind you. There's plenty of others—worse ones. But we'll just say I left him because he couldn't make money enough and because we didn't get

along. I suppose some of the reasons are my fault. I'm not perfect, God knows. But then neither is any one else so far as I can see. Of course I *might* go back to Red Bridge. Peter wants me to go back there. I guess you know why. He's got some sort of a contract with God to keep me from going to the devil." She threw her head back and laughed at her witticism. "I guess I'm old enough now to look after myself, and Peter's got all he can do to make his own way without looking after me. Well, there's no use making believe any longer. I've been thinking about things and I'm disposed to be reasonable. Peter is my husband. I might go back to him after a while. They say he's selling a picture now and then. We might be able to get along. But I don't want to be a dog in the manger. I don't love Peter the way you do."

"I think I've heard about enough of this." Tommy rose, and turning her back went toward the door of her dressing room.

"Well, there's no shame to you in that, is there?" asked Josie keenly.

"Shame!" Tommy twisted around toward her. Nothing that her visitor could have said would have detained her more effectually. Peter's wife spoke with great confidence, upon information that was already common property.

Tommy made no further reply. Already it seemed, the dignity of her affection for Peter had been tainted by this woman's tongue.

"Of course, there's no shame in loving a man, even if he does happen to be another woman's husband. I'm reasonable about that. Peter comes here to see you when

he's in New York. It's no secret, is it? I don't mind. And if I don't want him, I don't see why you shouldn't have him. That's what I came here to see you about. It took a good deal of nerve on my part and you haven't made it any too easy for me. But now that I've told you, I don't see why we can't sit down and talk things over as one woman of the world to another."

Tommy had paused at the table, where she stood staring at her unpleasant visitor, wanting to go away from her presence, and yet still curious to hear all the terms that were, of course, to accompany this extraordinary proposition.

"You have something else to say," she said, calmly.

"Oh, no," said Josie, rising. "Nothing much. I could get a divorce from Peter for what's happened in New Jersey. Or he could get one from me, if he preferred. Such things are managed. The main thing is, that the affair should be amicably arranged."

"And at a proper price," put in Tommy. "I understand."

Josie made a shrug and glanced at her reflection in the mirror between the windows.

"Well, of course, these things cost money. You couldn't expect *me* to pay the lawyers and everything. Now could you?"

Tommy's contempt rushed through her, in an angry flood, but she controlled her speech, remembering that if curiosity had been a motive in permitting this visit she had a duty—to discover, for Peter's sake, his wife's address and any other items of information that might help him in his persistent errand of compassion. A duty . . . but difficult.

"No—ah—of course not," she said, calmly. "Such things are expensive."

Josie's slanting eyes glanced at Tommy's face—rather hopefully, and yet slightly dubious at the reservation in her tone.

"Yes, very. And then you see I haven't any money myself except what I can make. I *could* go back to Peter now and demand my rights—since he's getting along better. But I'd be willing to leave him permanently and give him a divorce if I could be sure that I'd have enough—for a while anyhow—to get along on. That's reasonable, isn't it?"

"Well," Tommy said again, "I suppose so."

Josie frowned and glanced at the side wall. Acquisitiveness was nicely balanced against suspicion. But the vulgar mind takes alternatives boldly and so she plunged.

"I'll tell you what I'll do. You can take my proposition or leave it—as you like. I need money. I don't make any secret of that. You don't need it. You've got so much that you can straighten this whole business out and set Peter free, without any trouble for anybody. If I get the divorce, Peter needn't even know that you'd had anything to do with it."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, it sounds all right, doesn't it?"

Tommy was finding it astonishing that she had succeeded in keeping the calmness of her demeanor, that she hadn't had the woman shown out long before. But she questioned coolly: "And what do you want me to give you—ah—for your freedom?"

"Twenty thousand dollars and all expenses," said Josie, promptly.

"I see," Tommy replied. "Twenty thousand dollars." Only twice the cost of Tommy's automobile, for Peter's freedom and her own happiness! She smiled at her thought.

"And that's little enough," said Josie, easily. "You'd never miss it and it would mean a lot to me. Well, what do you say?"

Tommy was frowning but she spoke coolly.

"I can't decide such an important matter in a moment. I—ah—I'd have to think it over. But if you'll give me your address I might communicate with you later."

"Oh, you want to think about it. Well, of course you've got a right to do that. My address is Madden's garage, East Thirty-third. I live upstairs, but they'll take a message."

"Ah, Madden's garage, East Thirty-third. All right."

Tommy took a few paces up and down.

"And suppose," she said, slowly, "that I should decide *not* to pay you for this divorce?"

Josie twisted toward her, aware of the slight, almost indefinable change in her voice and manner.

"Suppose," Tommy continued, coolly, "that I should tell you that I couldn't consider your proposal, that as much as I despise you and pity your husband, I wouldn't soil my money by giving you a dollar of it for such a purpose or any other?"

And Tommy rang the bell for her maid.

Josie gave way a pace, her eyes drawn to mere slits of fire.

"Oh, so that's it!" she said, choking with rage. "I might have known you'd cut off your nose to spite your face, just because I got the best of you with Jack Salazar

and Peter Randle. Well, I might have given my husband a divorce if you'd acted halfway decent about it. But I tell you now that he'll never sue for one. Never. And I'll have my rights from him, too. You'll see. I'll make him wish—"

At this moment Lucette entered in response to Tommy's ring.

"Show this woman out, Lucette," she said, quietly. "And then open the window. The room needs airing."

Josie's small figure seemed to tremble with tension like a spring that had been drawn too tight. She glanced from Tommy to Lucette, who walked before her to the door and opened it. Then with a gasp and a quick enraged rush she vanished.

CHAPTER XVI

TOMMY, THE TEMPTRESS

1

NO one ever heard the true tale of what happened at Madden's garage when Peter, acting promptly on Tommy's information, had gone there to try to persuade his wife to give up the life that she was leading and return with him to Red Bridge. He merely told Tommy that his efforts had been unsuccessful and gave no details of the conversation with Josie or that with John Madden himself. But supplying the missing passages in Peter's bare statement, Tommy concluded that Josie was living, at least temporarily, in the apartment above the garage and at Mr. John Madden's expense. The interview with John Madden, following that with Josie, it appeared, had taken place in the office of the garage under conditions that made privacy impossible. There had been no physical combat, however. Peter wore a disappointed, hopeless air, and spoke of John Madden in a casual way which indicated that the man was not greatly to be blamed. Peter had, it seemed, to Tommy's great relief, relinquished the idea of attempting to punish every man who caught Josie's fancy. Of course, Josie had denied all guilt—though if Peter had chosen to avail himself of the evidence presented, he might have found a case against her. But she was so confident of Peter's clemency or so indifferent as to the results of her folly, that she emerged from the interview with a defiant air that convinced Peter

of the impossibility of a spiritual regeneration of any sort.

Tommy didn't know just what she had hoped for as a result of Peter's visit. She felt that she needed some sort of reward for having so splendidly done her duty. Perhaps she had thought that Peter's eyes might have been opened at last to the folly of his continued toleration. Perhaps she had believed the woman's vitriolic temper would have driven Peter to complete renunciation. But Peter had merely evaded Tommy's questions, preferring, as he said, "to talk of something pleasant" and had gone back to Red Bridge, slightly cheered by Tommy's tea and cakes, but no nearer to the solution of their problem than before.

This was to be the winter of Tommy's discontent. The future, as far as Peter was concerned, seemed utterly hopeless, for he had given her such definite proofs of his steadfastness to his marriage vows that Tommy, knowing how greatly he was being wronged, felt her loyalty to his point of view scarcely equal to the strain. There were even times when, greatly as she cared for him, she thought Peter's chivalrous attitude toward his wife much too stupid to be endured. There were other moments in the solitude of her rooms when in her impatience she was even ready to doubt the quality of Peter's love for her. Then at other moments, her conscience assailing her, she realized that egotism and vanity had come again as enemies to disinterestedness. It was in these moments that she wrote him and she was glad that she had never put to paper some of the thoughts that had come into her mind.

But the fact remained that the stoicism that had at first armed her in Peter's behalf had ceased to be a novelty.

Indeed, her loyalty to Peter, under the circumstances, had some of the aspects of amiable martyrdom. She was quite certain that she loved Peter as much as ever, but since he came to New York so seldom the forces of propinquity were lacking. She was sure that if she could have seen Peter constantly she would have been content with things as they were, for she knew that in spite of his ingenuous air of dependence which appealed to her mother instinct, he had really a much stronger will than her own. But she needed the constant impress of his personality. She was, after all, still the creature of her environment, accustomed to having things when she wanted them, and she could not deny a constant desire to bring Peter to the point of seeking the divorce to which she thought him so justly entitled. There was no light before them. She had promised to wait for Peter forever, but she was beginning to realize that forever was a long time. This was, of course, a reversion to type. She had taught herself to be selfish for twenty-eight years until she had fallen in love with Peter; and converts to new creeds are the most fervent because they fear their old faiths. Tommy loved Peter a great deal. But she didn't love him better than herself. Not yet. Peter could perform no miracle.

These unpleasant moments for Tommy passed as unpleasant moments will and when Peter came to New York at Christmas she was, of course, unaffectedly delighted to see him. Wingate and his daughter Mary had come on, too, for a round of the theaters and a spree, so Tommy got up a little supper in her apartment, adding Lola Oliver and Jimmy Blake, who could always be expected to lend to the gayety of such occasions. Indeed, their

company was needed, for Fred Wingate seemed tired and Peter apparently quietly unhappy.

When the others had gone Peter stayed. He was very reserved and kept himself under a greater control than Tommy thought fitting to the occasion. She kissed him bewitchingly but his air of abstraction, usually understood, provoked her. She managed to forget that the troubles that weighed so heavily upon Peter were her troubles too, and showed her pique in the sort of cruelty that women often employ toward the persons they love the best.

"Did you know, Peter, dear," she asked with an access of sweetness that would have warned a wiser man, "that I have had a most splendid offer of marriage?"

Peter straightened, staring at her, as though upon her face had been written the day and hour of his death.

"Judson Waite, my dear, the banker— He's quite splendid. Millions! Handsome, cultured and only forty-six. He's divorced, of course, but that didn't matter to *him*. He adores me, Peter. Says he can't live without me."

Peter relinquished Tommy's hand and rose with a bewildered air. He was very much disturbed. If she had expected to make him miserable the results of her experiment must have been entirely satisfactory. Peter paced the floor slowly, coming to a stop by the window where he stood motionless looking out into gloom.

"Of course, you've heard of him," she went on, coolly. "One of the most brilliant of the downtown crowd. The kind of man accustomed to leadership—good family, fine social position—he got the divorce from *her*, you see, for good reasons. He's very much alone and he wants *me* to

give grace to his houses and yachts and camps. He says he has always wanted children—”

From the window a sound came—a sort of groan. “Don’t, Tommy—don’t—”

She bent toward him, smiling, but Peter did not turn.

“I just thought I’d tell you,” she said, more gently.

What she didn’t tell him was that the conquest of Judson Waite, who was a collector of modern American paintings and a director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was the astonishing culmination of a protracted siege which Tommy had laid in behalf of Peter and Peter’s work. Judson Waite was the “bellwether” that Tommy had been seeking and she had used every art in developing this casual acquaintance into a friendship that might be put to service. Nor had she told Peter that yesterday Judson Waite had gone to the Lablache gallery with Tommy and bought one of Peter’s large canvases, “Spring in the Valley.” Peter had not seen Lablache and did not even know that the canvas had been sold. This startling proposal of Mr. Waite’s had taken Tommy quite by surprise, but did much to invigorate her self-esteem which had for weeks been somewhat below par. And the conquest of such a “catch” was too much of a triumph not to be used to awaken Peter, the dreamer, to the desirability of the person who had so fruitlessly given him the largess of her devotion.

Peter made no further sound. He stood with his head bent forward, peering out and down into the light and clamor of Madison Avenue as though an answer to his problem might be found there.

“Of course,” Tommy added, slowly, “I refused him.

But then such men are not accustomed to being refused in anything."

Peter turned into the room. She started up at the sight of the pain in his white face. She had not intended that he should suffer like this. But as she came toward him, he sawed at the air with his hands in a kind of command as he spoke.

"I know—it was to be—expected—of course. I've been mad—ever to dream of you. I'm not—I should have known—I'm not the kind of man for love. It's all too hopeless. I've got no chance. I can't stand in your way. I've never asked you to be true to me, have I? You offered that. There's no future in your loyalty to me. I—I've got to give you up. I want you to be happy. If you think this man will give you happiness, I—I want you to take him, Tommy."

He turned toward the door, his voice smothered with the effort of self-control. If he had burst into tears, the effect upon Tommy could not have been more harrowing. She wondered, blaming herself bitterly, if she could have planned deliberately such misery as this, to compensate for her own.

"Peter," she whispered, rushing to him, "please! Please take it all back. I've been cruel to you—cruel."

Her arms went around his shoulders, her face was turned up to his. He fondled her and kissed her gently.

"I—I'm glad you told me, Tommy," he said, quietly. "You've shown me the real state of things. You were meant for a life like—like the one he offers you. Wealth, honors and—and children—"

"But I don't want his homes—his wealth or—or his children. I—I want yours, my dear."

He yielded to her caresses, holding her close in a moment of passion and forgetfulness, the sweeter because it was forbidden.

"I don't want him, Peter," she murmured, "I have no ambitions—I never had. All he represents is outside my life. It doesn't mean anything to me. My only ambition is for you. My only passion is to take a part in your life, to have you for my own—to see you successful and happy. I want you, Peter, dear. I want you so much."

Thus her heart spoke while she was safe in Peter's arms. It spoke truly, for the sight of his suffering had touched her, and since it spoke truly it had to speak fully.

"Give her up, Peter," she whispered, her eyes wet with her emotion. "For my sake if not for your own. Give her up. There's no law of God or man to compel you to be loyal to a woman like that. Divorce her, Peter, I ask you to. You'll never regret it. I'll make you happy again—"

She felt his arms relax. His eyes closed as though to gain strength by shutting out the brief vision of his happiness. He put a hand up as though to defend himself from an invisible enemy and turned away.

"Divorce!" he groaned. "I—I can't do that. You shouldn't have asked it of me."

He walked away from her with long strides to the door and turned, his arms gesturing wildly. "Yes, you had the right to ask it of me. It was your right. But I—I refuse. It's the only thing I can do. I've been selfish to stand in your way—to expect anything of you. I give you up."

"Peter, don't!"

"I've got to give you up. This sort of thing can't go on. Its sweetness is terrible. It takes my strength—weakens my resolutions."

"Be weak, Peter," she pleaded, desperately. "You are strong in so many things. Can't you be weak for me? Is it so much to ask?"

"Oh, Tommy, my dear!" Her voice, her tears bewildered him. If he remained in the room he knew that he was lost—she swayed toward him expectantly. But he gave her a frightened glance and turned away. "I give you up," she heard him say violently as he went toward the door. "I—I—give—you up."

And in a moment the outside door crashed behind him.

Tommy stood staring and then sank into the nearest chair, weeping desperately. They were bitter tears to Tommy, for to those who weep seldom, each tear is as poignant as the blood from an open wound.

2

The purchaser of your painting "Spring in the Valley" [wrote Lablache to Peter who had taken the night train back to Red Bridge] is Mr. Judson Waite, the banker and collector. The price is twenty-five hundred dollars, and a check for the amount less my commission is herewith enclosed. It may interest you further to learn that Mr. Waite, who is a member of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Gallery of Arts, is very much interested also in the small canvas of yours entitled "Island Idyll" and has promised to suggest it to the curator of paintings for possible purchase and addition to the permanent collection.

Permit me to congratulate you upon this very impressive triumph of your art in gaining the flattering approval of a

man whose influence is so great. I will inform you later as to the disposal that is made of the island picture and in the meanwhile I hope that you have some other canvases available that you can send on at once to take the places of those withdrawn from my gallery.

And I am, my dear Mr. Randle,

Yours with great respect,

A. LABLACHE.

Opposed to the terrible irony of this success was the other irony that Tommy was responsible for it.

Peter tried to look back with a reasonable mind upon the circumstances that had led to his renunciation of the happiness that Tommy had offered him, but found some difficulty in reconciling his last madness with the indebtedness of which this letter so definitely reminded him. He understood now the meaning of her friendship for the banker and the motives that had prompted it. She had done all this for him with the one idea of bringing him to the attention of the picture buyers and giving an immediate material success to an art that might wait long for recognition. Of course, he knew that neither Tommy nor any one else could have made his pictures sell if they hadn't been good pictures, but her service had given him nevertheless a sense of obligation that was very like a promise.

The moment with Tommy had offered the greatest temptation of his life. Perhaps, if he had not been at Josie's new apartment before going to the Ritz, he might have yielded. Tommy did not know of Peter's visit of the afternoon or of the eagerness of his attempt to take advantage of Josie's latest calamity and bring her to some sense of the impending dangers of her situation.

There seemed no need to tell Tommy of that. He had come to the Ritz heavy with the weight of his failure and yet more than ever impressed by his duty to his wife whose folly had already put her almost, if not quite, beyond the reach of any helping hand.

Peter had gone to Josie because she had sent for him—the first message that he had had from her since she had left Red Bridge. It was very obvious to Peter that she would not have sent for him if she hadn't been in need of money. He found her rather desperate but quite without pride or any sense of compunction in her demands upon him. She was looking very badly, he thought, without the slightest vestiges of the rather common prettiness that had made her dependence upon him so affecting. She seemed very nervous and was taking some pills out of a dark little bottle that she kept in her handbag. It would have been difficult—even for Peter—to be sorry for her if he hadn't been sure that her frail body could not long endure the constant excitements upon which she lived. There might have been hope for her still if he could induce her to go to Red Bridge. Of course, she had refused. He had pleaded, threatened, cajoled, but she had only laughed at him. There was something rather maddening in her sense of humor at his expense and Tommy's, but in her sodden mind there was, he realized, a shrewd notion of his continuing sense of responsibility for the failure of their marriage. She had said nothing of her visit to Tommy's apartment. It wasn't much to be proud of even for Josie, but the ingenuousness of Peter's point of view must have given her a clear idea of how things were with Peter at the Ritz. And so she had just laughed. She couldn't destroy Tommy but she could laugh at her.

It was then that Peter left the apartment.

From this interview, sordid and scurrilous on Josie's part, Peter had gone uptown to Tommy's dinner table and his friends. He had had no heart for their jolliness and could not, in spite of his efforts, relinquish the drab memories of Josie and her red plush divan, her soiled lilac dressing sacque (dreadful colors), her nervous cough and her little brown bottle. She was very real, very unlovely, and yet to the concepts of Peter's conscience, a part of himself, his own creature, his own responsibility. For of all the elements that had gone to make Peter's marriage, pity still remained and he thought of her as an incompetent, a neurotic, a fit subject for medical attention.

And then as the memories had yielded to the persuasions of good company, Tommy had come to him, with her soft arms, her hair like corn-silk and her dark eyes that reflected all the deep quiet things of his spirit, like brown pools in a forest—Tommy had come, in his need, offering him temptation. He realized now that if it hadn't been for that visit to Josie in the afternoon he might have yielded. Instead, he had done something that was to destroy forever his peace of mind and her devotion. In this cold hour of retrospection, his act of renunciation had all the aspects of a virtuous and somewhat priggish brutality.

He had, then, brought an end to the one relationship that mattered most to him in all the world. For it was inconceivable that Tommy should continue to give him her affection. He had lost her—a loss that now seemed to have been inevitable from the beginning. He sat down to write, so that she might better understand the real

claims that the woman he had married now had upon his charity and forbearance. He seemed to owe Tommy such a letter as a salve to her self-esteem. But as soon as he sat he found that his pen would not write. How could a man apologize to a woman for refusing to marry her? The idea was preposterous. There was nothing to be said. And correspondence only opened the door to continued misunderstanding, placing him in a position that was not to be explained. So he threw down his pen and went into the studio to stretch some canvases. If she wrote to him. . . .

She did write to him. It was a very amiable letter with none of the fury that has already been associated with the tongue or pen of the woman who has been scorned.

Of *course* you wouldn't write! What is there to say when one has said the final word? You have *given me up*. That would be funny, Peter dear, if it wasn't so desperately serious. For how can you *give up* something you've never been able to possess? I was going to write *willing* instead of *able*, but that would have been unkind. It's only your spirit that isn't willing—that terrible conscience of yours that puts duty ahead of everything. And yet even though I can't agree with it, I can—with an effort—admire its honesty. Thank God, Peter dear, I know how much you love me, or my pride would have been hurt beyond *recovery*. If I didn't know that it was your love that had been triumphant, I should have been wounded to death. Probably, out of pique I should have rushed violently into the waiting arms of my newest admirer. But I haven't done so. At the present moment I am trying again to see things from your point of view. It's difficult. I can't because I am not you, and because I'm not married to a person who has given me a just cause for divorce. You don't believe in divorce—at least from Josie Brant. I do—at least from Josie

Brant. At the beginning I was so sure that everything was right, that love like yours and mine was worth any sacrifice, that just being with you and loving you was enough. But that sort of thing couldn't go on. I realize it now. I suppose I'm too material and too selfish.

Of one thing I'm sure. You're right at least in that. We mustn't see each other for a long time—*six months*. At the end of that time I'll tell you whether I agree to be *given up* or not. For the present, I'm just your devoted, if somewhat lacerated

TOMMY.

Peter read this letter a number of times. It was so like her in every respect that it was almost the same as having her in the studio beside him. There was something rather splendid in the persistence of her devotion after what had happened. The letter made him happy though he knew that the time limit she had put upon her endurance might only be a way of declaring, at last, her independence. There was but one reply—to write her fully of his visit to Josie and of the desperate plight in which he had found her.

I can't desert her now, Tommy [he wrote in a final fury of earnestness]. She's already broken with sickness and dissipation, a mere shadow. Drugging herself too. There's no helping her, of course, because she's reckless, indifferent to what happens to her. Perhaps, you can't understand why I feel my responsibility for all this. But it's very poignant to me. *I could have kept her decent if I hadn't lost my money.* I didn't marry her under false pretenses, but *she was the victim of promises I couldn't keep.* That was all my fault. It was also my fault that I couldn't provide for her. I could have saved her even then if I hadn't driven her from the house

by my brutality. These things may seem little to you in view of my previous excellent intentions, but to me they are very real measures of my obligation. These are the things that have made my responsibilities to Josie greater than in a marriage under different—under more conventional conditions. *Try to understand this.* I'd give my life for you, Tommy, but what you ask isn't mine to give.

It was the end of a chapter. Peter went about his work in a fury of creation that led to self-forgetfulness. Tommy, in a spirit of resignation to the inevitable took up Jimmy Blake, the theaters and late suppers and dances, trying to find in the old haunts and the old companions a recurrence of the old thrills of excitement. These failing her she accepted the attentions of Mr. Waite, who invited persons of social prominence to meet her. And in this atmosphere, which was slightly "highbrow" and stodgy, Tommy behaved with great credit. She was, you see, gaining poise as she grew older.

CHAPTER XVII

JOSIE PLAYS HER TRUMP

1

IF there was irony in the purchase of Peter's pictures by Mr. Judson Waite, there was a further irony in the interest of other collectors upon the mailing list of Mr. Lablache, who came and looked at Peter's paintings and predicted a great future for him. Two of the smaller canvases were sold at good prices, for Lablache was a skillful exhibitor and used the prestige that had come with the purchase of the painting by the Metropolitan in investing Peter's name with a sort of reverent dignity that he had found to be most impressive. "An eccentric fellow, Randle—not a great producer—but very sound. And honest with his art! Why—do you know. . . ."

And then Lablache would tell the story of Peter's first picture, "Dawn on the Hills," and the curtains of Mrs. McFadden's breakfast room.

And so Peter's eccentricities—long a liability—were now to be an asset, for it is the custom of conventional people to take pleasure in patronizing the unconventional. There was money in Peter's bank at Smithville and the future seemed roseate. Peter took his new canvases to Lablache and went to see Josie. When she understood that he brought her money, she became suddenly quite polite and made him many promises. And Peter, whose money was not really money but just so much opportunity

to provide immunity for Josie from the perils of bad company, gave her half of what he had in bank in order that she might be made more comfortable. He told her that Red Bridge with its quiet was what she needed, but she demurred to that. They parted, however, with Josie in an agreeable mood and Peter went home hopeful that his visit had paved the way to a better understanding in the future.

It was astonishing how financial success had restored Peter's self-esteem. Its irony seemed less conspicuous in the light of the continued public approval of his work. And while he gave Tommy credit for the strokes that had influenced his career, he realized, too, that if he hadn't had something out of the ordinary to offer, her efforts would have been unavailing. He understood the qualities that had made a demand for his pictures, and was wise enough to act upon the advice of Lablache in developing his future work. This advice fortunately coincided with his own ideas and the winter passed with a number of good canvases to his credit. The early spring found him outdoors again, prowling hopefully up and down the valley, a creature newly born to the sense of his ability and opportunities. He had found himself.

Tommy's note in reply to his letter of gratitude was the last word that he was to have from her until May. This was Tommy's idea—that no word of any sort was to pass between them—but Peter heard of her frequently from Wingate, who reported that Tommy was often seen with Judson Waite and that rumor said she would probably marry him. Wingate imparted this information with the sober air of a man who prepares a friend for an event which may possibly destroy his peace of mind. Peter

was, of course, miserable, but since he had already decided that he had nothing to ask or expect of Tommy, his misery was only comparatively greater than before. Then one day Lola wrote that Tommy had suddenly left New York and gone to California. Lola was curious as to Judson Waite, who was still in New York, but Tommy had taken no one into confidence in regard to her affairs or her plans.

Peter painted hard that spring but no other pictures were definitely sold. When Josie's money was gone she wrote to Peter, of course, for more, and he found that her amiability was exactly to be measured by the generosity of his checks. A visit to her apartment made late in March revealed a number of unpaid bills for considerable amounts which she produced with an air of dexterity and placed in Peter's hands, apparently quite forgetful of her promise to allow no bills to accumulate. Peter paid them but informed her with some firmness that all bills for necessities should be sent at once to him and that he would not be responsible in future for extraordinary expenses for wearing apparel which must be bought out of the allowance in cash that he would give her. She gave the proposition her shrug of indifference and changed the conversation to one of sardonic inquiry as to the departure of Miss Keith from New York. She seemed to be very well informed as to Peter's affairs.

During Peter's visit the telephone bell rang, so with little ceremony she hurried out to keep an appointment and he went up town with a new sense of the futility of the whole arrangement. Talking reason to Josie was like trying to come to terms with a flea.

Late one afternoon in May Peter was up on the hills

above the McVitty place, painting the view looking down the river. It was a large canvas, thirty-five by forty, and Peter was attempting the experiment, at Wingate's suggestion, of finishing it in one stretch of five hours. He had studied the motive often and by his knowledge of the play of light had managed to get the canvas covered by five o'clock, the hour when the shadows fell over the western hills of the river, bringing into strong relief the brilliant color of the eastern bank. It was a kind of *tour-de-force* for Peter, whose casual art required the deliberation of the studio; but the work had gone well and he painted with the boldness of a man who knows exactly what he wants to do and how to do it.

Peter worked with a furious joy during the last hour of consummation. Color leapt into its place on the canvas. Forms grew. The thing was instinct with life, and Peter thrilled with the godlike joy of creation. In it, he forgot that there was any unhappiness, any misery in all the world, even his own.

And then, suddenly—a breeze stirred and the light turned orange. They say that it takes two men to make a picture—one man to paint it, the other to kill him when he has finished. Peter was wise enough to know that his picture was finished and that he could do no more. Nature had suddenly changed to the minor key. He laid his brushes and palette down, still examining his canvas, and fumbled for his tobacco. He'd done Wingate's trick—five hours without a rest and he'd done it well. Straight painting, that—from the shoulder blades, too. He'd show Fred there were other people who could finish a big canvas *au premier coup*. Good stuff. He wouldn't touch

it—not even to-morrow in the studio—this was the sort of thing that couldn't be niggled with.

As Peter put his tobacco pouch away, there was a sound behind him among the dead leaves of the orchard. A woman was standing in purple silhouette against the sky. The sun blinded him as he stared. And then the woman laughed and Peter went stumbling with stiffened knees toward her. There was an unmistakable elegance about the small figure quite out of place in this rustic setting.

Peter cried out in amazement.

"Hello, Peter," said Tommy, coolly.

"How long—have you been—"

"Since last night. But I couldn't bear to disturb you."

He caught her by the hands and turned her to the light as though not yet quite certain about it being really Tommy.

"But I don't understand—"

She gave him a twisted smile but made no reply.

"What you're doing here? I—I thought you were in California."

"I might as well have been there when you were working," she said with a laugh.

"Well, w—what does it mean?"

"I've just come back, that's all."

"Oh! Back! I see."

"How stupid you are, Peter." And then with a quick glance upward, "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

He did this, still bewildered, but Tommy drew away with a laugh.

"Why didn't you write me you were coming?" he asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps because I thought you might run away from me."

He grinned foolishly.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, Tommy."

"I'm not so sure. You did, you know, when you gave me up."

"Yes," he muttered, somberly, "so I did."

He seemed suddenly to be face to face with realities, but Tommy was still quite calm and smiling.

"Well, you see, my dear, the six months are past history. I've decided that I don't want to be given up. I came down here to tell you so."

Peter was staring at her fatuously. A situation such as this would have been astonishing to men less easily astonished than Peter. It seemed to him that he ought to be pretty desperate about it. But he wasn't, really. It was very difficult to be desperate with Tommy there before him smiling cheerfully. So Peter finally gave a sort of guffaw which resolved itself presently into laughter.

"Excellent," said Tommy, coolly. "I always knew you had a sense of humor. Kiss me again and then bundle up your traps. I'm going to take you home."

"You—?"

"Yes. The car is out in the lane. There's going to be another scandal in Red Bridge soon—so why not now?"

He frowned, grinned at her, then obeyed, fastening his canvas with braces against another of the same size, taking his easel down and packing his brushes and colors, while Tommy watched him curiously.

In reply to his questions she told him that she was

staying with the Wingates for a few days, but as there was a great deal for them to talk about, she expected, after she drove him home, that he would invite her to supper. And Peter, inwardly delighted at her insistence, piled his traps into the car and lighting his pipe rode down the lane to the high road and so to the island.

They supped on ham and eggs, fried potatoes, tea and strawberry jam, and then went to the studio where Tommy fell into Peter's morris chair and Peter stood at the fender where he could look at her and smoked his pipe. It was an agreeable moment. They had the island to themselves. Martha was away. Soft airs came in through the open studio door. It seemed that nothing could harm them—nothing dismay. And so they enjoyed it as though aware that exchange of thought upon the topic nearest their hearts might break the spell of their contentment.

"Well, Peter, I suppose you're waiting for me to tell you all about everything, aren't you?"

"I don't seem to care about anything," said Peter, gravely, "now that you're here."

"Don't you? But I think I'd better," she said with a smile at him. "First, I'd better tell you that I was sure the experiment wouldn't work when you insisted on running away. I'm awfully funny. I'm given to fixed ideas as you are and I can't be jarred loose from them without a shock of some sort. I suppose you might say I'm stubborn—though you wouldn't admit for a moment that *you* were. Oh, don't be alarmed, my dear," she insisted suddenly when Peter frowned. "I'm excessively cheerful over the situation, and quite reconciled to everything. It has taken a good deal of thinking and a good deal of

patience and it has meant taking my whole life up by the roots, examining it and putting it back into fresh soil. But here I am again after six months of experimentation enjoying your excellent society and wondering why I was so foolish as to deprive myself of it for so long."

Peter came forward eagerly but she waved him back with an airy authority.

"No. I've thought all that out, too. We're going to be the best friends that ever were in the world, but we're going to be only that. A kiss? Perhaps—once in a while—when words of friendship aren't perhaps quite adequate to our meaning. But not now. I've got a lot to say and there isn't going to be any surplus emotion expended. I want to be quite honest with you—as honest as you've been. When you went away I suffered a great deal, my dear— Oh, don't bother. I got over it all right. I suppose what hurt me most was the fact that your idea of duty could be more important than your idea of love, especially since my idea of your duty was quite different from yours. I knew that you were right, though—that things couldn't go on as they were going. And I made up my mind to forget you—eliminate you. I rushed about rather wildly for a time, trying to find a taste for the old pursuits. It couldn't be done. Curious, wasn't it? I seemed to be somebody else. I tried the old crowd—Jimmy and the rest. Then Judson Waite. I knew I needed him for you, but I found that that was all I needed him for. I wasn't tempted to marry him. Not for a minute. He hadn't anything to offer me that I couldn't have bought myself if I'd wanted it, except a fearfully stodgy crowd that bored me to tears.

So I went away. Judson Waite wondered why. He had a way of squinting with one eye when he got excited about anything. I used to like to get him excited just to see him squint. Then it got on my nerves. I ran away to Pasadena from that squint."

Peter grinned.

"I told you I'd be honest with you, Peter. I tried my best to like him well enough to marry him. He was very kind, too, and I was rather desperate. But I couldn't. I'd learned that happiness was something that couldn't be bought just with money and that love, even though it was unsuccessful, was greater than anything else in the world. If I hadn't known you loved me Peter, I think after what had happened, that I should have died. . . ."

"I adored you," said Peter, reasonably. "I adore you now."

"Thank you, dear," she replied, softly. "I know it. And don't you see, that's what made it possible for me to look at things differently. I don't want anybody but you, but I'm quite calm about it. Perhaps you've noticed. I want you to marry me. It's the only thing I've ever wanted that I've ever been refused. I suppose that's the reason I want it most. Well, I'm not going to let it break my heart because you won't and I'm not going to go rushing around trying to avoid you—when being with you is what I want. That's just common sense, isn't it?"

Peter smiled dubiously. Perhaps his self-confidence was less reassuring than her own.

"God knows," he muttered, "whether it's common sense or not, but it's most satisfactory. There's no law against it, that's sure."

Tommy rose. "I'm glad you see it that way. So far as I'm concerned Josie Brant can go to the devil."

"I think she's doing it, my dear," said Peter, somberly, after a moment. "I can't help her. She's out of my reach. All she cares about is the money I can give her."

"Little beast!" said Tommy, composedly.

"I've given her all I could, but she's lost all sense of proportion," Peter went on. "Dope. Heroin. She said she got the habit in the hospital when she suffered so. I tried to get her to come down here where she can't get it, but she said she'd rather die. So I've cut down her allowance. She writes me wild letters now—when her checks don't come. I think I've taught her to need me again. That's my job, Tommy."

"Oh, I know," gasped Tommy, who rose and walked around. "And my job to sit by and see her do it." She threw out her arms with an expressive gesture. "Don't you think I'm noble, Peter? I do. Can't you see me growing old, with little spit-curls around my forehead and a cap, a parrot and a couple of cats, just sitting somewhere near the great Peter Randle and waiting for Josie Brant to die?"

"Don't!" said Peter.

But Tommy had fallen gleefully into her new mood.

"I'm going to be a cheerful little old lady. You'll see. All pink and white and smiles. I'm thinking of taking a house down here somewhere this summer. Or maybe," she said, mischievously, "you need a housekeeper."

Peter's sobriety wasn't proof against her sense of humor.

"I do. When can you come? And what wages?"

"It would be nice—such a simple arrangement. You're

awfully messy. Paint rage all over the place. And matches aimed at nowhere in particular. I wish I could. What's wrong with it? Other men have housekeepers . . . Wouldn't Red Bridge rage? The idea is too perfect to be practical," she finished, ruefully.

"Or too practical to be perfect," he added.

She wandered around the place peering into things and moving them about, quite with an air of proprietorship.

"This place needs a cleaning—terribly. I'll have to run in here once in a while and look after things. I really mean what I said about taking a house down here this summer. Why not? I've done Europe until I was blue in the face. I've seen 'America first.' The thought of the sea or mountains bores me. I like Red Bridge. It's a quiet little town. And there's a nice house near where you were painting to-day—"

"The McVittys'—!" gasped Peter.

"The McVittys'. They wouldn't mind moving out if I paid them enough, would they?"

"The McVitty family have lived there for a hundred and fifty years."

"Then it's time they moved. Won't you fix it, Peter? Please. It's so close I could just slip down here and put your house in order when you were out. Then I could give you tea and cakes every afternoon when you come in from the field. A spiritual marriage, Peter. What need we care for wives and things? I, Tommy, take thee, Peter, to be my wedded spiritual husband, to love and obey—spiritually, of course. Don't you think that's a nice idea?"

"Until death us do part," said Peter, gently. He put an arm around her and held her for a moment. "It

almost seems like that already, since you've come back. Your devotion is more than I deserve. I wanted to give you your chance but you wouldn't take it. You've disarmed me with your loyalty—your gentleness. When you pleaded with me to do something I thought I had no right to do, I could resist you. It's your submission that hurts. There's something too much like martyrdom about it—gentle as it is."

He kissed her while she lay passive in his arms.

"What right have I to make you a victim of my mad sense of duty, my crazy conscience! I have no wife but you, God knows—"

"Peter! Don't!" she whispered as vibrant as he, "you mustn't, you're breaking faith—your own, mine—"

2

Josie entered the room through the open door from outside and stood upon the threshold. Behind her bristled the brown walruslike mustache on the swarthy, foolish face of the mighty rabbit-hunter, Harvey Wilson, proprietor of the Red Lion hotel. There was another man in the shadows that Peter didn't know. How long they had been in the vicinity was not revealed and only when Josie spoke was Peter aware of her, a thin figure in brown, her face white as chalk under the rouge. But she had her most audacious air as she spoke.

"I guess I planned this visit just about right," she said with a dry laugh. "Injured wife comes upon guilty pair in each other's arms."

She turned to her companions, who stood grinning at a situation which was to provide the Red Lion with gossip

for weeks to come. "Well, gentlemen," said Josie with a businesslike air to her companions, "you saw them, didn't you? This is Masie Keith that's trying to get my husband away from me—alienation of affections is what they call it. I just want you to look at her carefully so that you can identify her when I ask you to."

The full meaning of this visit and the purposes behind it only came to Peter and Tommy through Josie's spoken words. The situation would have been awkward and unpleasant enough without the presence of the visitors from the village, who seemed by their air of self-confidence to have a complete share in the conspiracy. But as Tommy drew away from him Peter took a step forward, as though instinctively to protect her.

"Send those men out of here," he said quietly to Josie. "If you don't I'll throw them out."

He took a pace forward, but Josie intervened.

"I guess you better go, Harvey," she said, nervously. "I've got something I want to say. Go up the lane and sit in the flivver. I'll be going back to the hotel presently."

Wilson glanced at Peter, leered at Tommy, pulled at his heavy mustache and followed the other man out. Peter slammed the door and turned to his wife.

"Well," he said, angrily, "what's the meaning of this?"

Josie crossed the room to the fireplace and put her handbag on the mantel—a significant motion, an assertion of her rights in this house. Then she turned and faced Peter and Tommy.

"The meaning? As if you didn't know! I came down here to get the evidence I've been waiting for for months. And I guess I've got it." She laughed unpleasantly at

Tommy, who stood at one side, completely at a loss in the situation. "I suppose *she* thought she could sneak down here as soon as she got back from the West without my knowing anything about it. Well, I was prepared for that. I've got a few friends in Red Bridge to look after my interests." She gave a shrug and twitched around toward them.

"I suppose you've got something to say."

She spoke jerkily, her words unduly accented, as though her motor centers impelled against their will. She was thinner than when she had visited Tommy's apartment, and gave the impression that all the energy remaining in her frail body was concentrated upon her resentment.

Peter stared at her. He had reached the limit of his tolerance, but he had to admit that she had a commanding position. And there was Tommy to think of. He swung his hands to and fro before finding utterance.

"See here, Josie—you—ah—you've gone too far—with this wild talk—coming down like this—bringing these fellows in here. I've come to the end of my patience. I want you to understand—you can't make statements reflecting on Miss Keith—"

"I can't? Well, you just listen then—"

"I forbid you." Peter strode forward as Tommy spoke.

"One moment, Peter," she said, coolly, as he paused. "Let her speak. I don't mind."

"Well, I'm going to speak whether she wants me to or not. You might think from the way you treat me that I had no rights in this house, that I was an intruder, and that you two could keep up this game of pulling the wool over people's eyes down here the way you did it in New

York. Well, it can't be done. I knew I'd get my chance if I waited long enough and it's come now. There isn't a court in New Jersey or anywhere else that wouldn't see my side of this case with the witnesses I've got. You wanted my husband, Maisie Keith, and you've done everything you could to break up our home. You got his love away from me, so that he treated me badly and I had to go away from Red Bridge. But even that didn't satisfy you. You had to keep after him when he was trying his best to do what was right. That's true. I haven't anything against *him*. It's *you* I'm after and I guess you'll see when this thing comes out, that you'll have to pay for the fun you've had at my expense." She had a sharp fit of nervous coughing, but went on, her physical difficulties mastered by the urgency of her purpose.

"I gave you your chance. I wanted to be reasonable when I saw the way things were going. I made you a good offer to give my husband a divorce—"

"Tommy!" said Peter, aghast.

"I didn't tell you, Peter. She wanted—"

"Twenty thousand dollars—that's all. You could have been married to her by this time—"

"She dared do that!" Peter gasped.

Josie gave a laugh. "Well, she hadn't sense enough to see it. Instead, she treated me as if I'd come to steal her jewelry instead of doing her a favor. Sent me out of her apartment as if I'd been a servant."

All of Josie's small frame seemed to grow compact with rage as she turned to Tommy.

"You've been lording it over people for a long time, Maisie Keith, with your fine airs, and your money, but

you'll be glad to come to me for mercy before this case is over with. And you won't get out of it for any twenty thousand dollars—for five times that either. I'll show you that you can't trample *me* under your feet. I'll give your swell friends at the Ritz something to read about in the newspapers. I'll let people know you for what you are—”

Peter had reached her side and caught her by the elbows with an effort to head off the wild torrent of invectives, but she wrenched away from him laughing hysterically.

“Maybe you think I don't know where I stand in this affair. Well, I do know. With the evidence I've got of what's going on between you two, I'll make her pay what I please.”

She took a pace toward Tommy, exhausting her last ounce of venom.

“And you—I'm going to make you wish you'd never been born, before you'd treated me the way you have. I've hated you from the beginning and I hate you now. You—you—”

Her utterance choked her and she stumbled backward, one hand at her throat. There was a sudden frightened look in her eyes. As Peter came forward she sank into a chair in a struggle for breath, between paroxysms of coughing. One hand made a gesture toward the mantel as she tried to speak.

“My bag—! Medicine!” she managed to gasp. Peter brought it to her. She fumbled at the bag and found the small bottle with which Peter was already familiar. He handed her a glass of water that Tommy had brought from the tap and she drank. The woman was sick in

body as well as in mind. Both of them realized that. Already there came to Peter, again, some of the old compassion.

"You're not well, Josie," he muttered. "You'd better not try to go back. Your room is all ready for you—"

With an effort she got up and took a few steps toward the door.

"No—no. I—"

And then volition suddenly failing her, she stumbled forward, groping, and would have fallen if Peter hadn't caught her in his arms. He put her on the couch where she lay, breathing stertorously, her eyes closed, in a state of collapse.

Peter found the whisky and managed to get some of it between her lips while Tommy rushed to her car to go for Wingate and a doctor.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ULTIMATE TEST

1

PETER'S wife was very ill. After a careful examination the doctor announced pneumonia, a heart greatly dilated and general condition most unsatisfactory. He put her to bed in Peter's room and advised having a trained nurse. The collapse had been so complete and so sudden that the patient had neither the strength nor the will to oppose them. She must have been a prey to the disease for several days and it seemed that she had only kept herself going by the free use of stimulants, which over a period of time had weakened the resistance of her system.

As to a trained nurse, he was dubious whether one could be found in Smithville and suggested communication at once with a Nurses' Registry in Philadelphia. Here Tommy and her car became useful. She volunteered to drive to Philadelphia and bring the nurse back with her, if arrangements could be made over long distance telephone in the meanwhile. To this the doctor agreed and there being no telephone in Peter's house she drove him to the Wingates'. Fred at once offered to go with her and by two o'clock in the morning they were back at Red Bridge and the nurse went immediately on duty.

This pitiable ending of Josie's visit of blackmail and vengeance was so distressing to Peter that all thought of resentment had passed from his mind. He had realized

for some months that the use of narcotics had worked a change for the worse in Josie's nature; or rather had so influenced her propensities that the evil was more strongly predominant. He had no desire to dwell upon the selfishness and venality of the sick woman and even found some justification in the thought that the drug to which she was addicted had, for months, deprived her of her reasoning faculties. So Peter gave himself up wholly to the business of trying to restore his wife to health, taking turns with the nurse at the bedside.

The Smithville doctor confirmed the diagnosis of Dr. Loomis. There was nothing much to do but await the crisis, which would be a matter of a few days. Both doctors admitted in reply to Peter's questions that there was a chance of his wife's recovery, but a slight one. She was in a high fever now, delirious most of the time, and as Peter sat by her bedside raved wildly of names and places entirely unfamiliar to him. There were phrases of invective for Tommy, and repetitions of old and painful scenes with Peter. It was all very distressing to hear, but Peter did not spare himself, giving up his work altogether and only leaving the house to run errands to the local drug store or to Smithville for appliances not to be procured in Red Bridge.

Tommy's attitude from the moment of Josie's seizure had been admirable. Whether she felt the misfortunes of Peter's wife as deeply as Peter did, she expressed a warm approval of Peter's sense of duty and in the few moments that they spent together before her departure for New York, assured him that she bore no resentment whatever for the things that Josie had said to her and of her. Death stalked in Peter's house, solemnly reminding them

both that this was the hour of their renunciation. But she promised to write to Peter, and later on, if he wished to see her, to return for a few days to Red Bridge.

Intolerant and vindictive as Josie had been, Peter knew that he and Tommy hadn't been altogether without blame. There had been moments when his obligations to his wife had been quite forgotten. Her appearance upon the scene at one of these moments, seemed indeed a proper retribution—though the means by which Josie had accomplished it had given him a new sharp sense of her unworthiness. She had, it appeared, played her game to win, using the omniscient proprietor of the Red Lion, whose finances, as everybody knew, were at a low ebb and whose conscience was not above stooping to discreditable pursuits in the attempt to restore them. This must have been an acquaintance that Josie had made during the days of her discontent and continued by correspondence from New York, when a possible use for his services had been discovered. No car passed the steps of the Red Lion without comment or inquiry and there had been ample time, after Tommy's arrival at the Wingates', for him to notify Josie in New York and to provide, by a watch on Peter's actions, the proper moment for the dénouement.

It was all rather brutal and beastly, but Peter put it out of his mind, and in Josie's moments of consciousness treated her with every mark of consideration. There were times when she seemed about to speak to him of their affairs, but he soothed her gently and told her how important it was that she should think of nothing disturbing. She was, most of the day, in a kind of daze of weak-

ness and lay motionless, only her eyes following his motions around the room. She knew that she was very sick, was very much frightened at the thought of death—and spoke of her fear from time to time. But Peter reassured her, telling her that if she obeyed orders there was an excellent chance of her recovery. And curiously enough, somewhere in that thin and wasted frame there were vital forces that enabled her to pass the crisis of the disease successfully.

In convalescence there came in Josie's attitude toward life some signs of gentleness. She was very weak and lay staring out of the windows into the bright sunshine, saying little, but she smiled at Peter from time to time and showed appreciation for all that was being done for her. She was petulant, too, at moments, gaining back her courage with her strength, and relapsed into moods of silence that defied the most cheerful efforts of her nurses. There seemed to be some sort of a struggle going on in her mind, as to the inconsistency of her attitude toward Peter with his efforts in her behalf. She had been so long accustomed to intolerance that the gentler emotions arising from her weakness were strange to her. But she said nothing of the scene that had brought about her collapse or of Tommy Keith; and Peter, aware of possible dangers in a discussion of personal matters, gave her the news of the day from the New York newspapers and quoted the hopes of the doctor for her speedy recovery.

But one afternoon in June when the nurse was off duty Josie interrupted Peter's reading, and Peter with some mental reservations laid his paper aside. In her chair by the window, to which Peter had carried her, and propped among pillows, she seemed very frail, out of all immediate

danger, and surely upon the road to recovery, but subject still to attacks of weakness.

"Peter, I've got to talk about things—"

"Do you think you'd better?"

"Oh, I'm not going to get excited," she said with a smile. "And it will be a good deal better for me to say what I've got on my mind than to lie here and think about it."

Peter reached for his pipe and pouch.

"Well," she went on, weakly, "it looks as if I was going to get well. I suppose I ought to have died. I guess I would have if it hadn't been for you. But now that I'm going to get well, I've got to begin to look things in the face again. I wanted you to know that I haven't got anything against *you*, Peter. You've certainly done all you could. And, of course, you think I've been pretty rotten to you. I guess I have. I'm sorry. When I get well I'm going to get out of here and you'll never see me again. That's straight—"

"That's nonsense," Peter said, cheerfully.

"No. I'm going to try to be square with you. That's what I wanted to tell you. I never loved you, Peter. I guess you knew that. You weren't my kind any more than I was yours. And you didn't love me. I knew that too. I never loved anybody but Jack Salazar, I didn't want anybody else no matter what he did to me. I might as well tell you the truth. I thought maybe if I was married to you he might want me again. That was a funny way of thinking. But it was right. He came back to me for a while. . . . Then he left me. I got pretty wild, mad at you for coming between us—mad at him for quitting the way he did. And I didn't care much what happened

to me. . . . There's no use telling you about that, though. I just want to tell you what I've been thinking about lying here. I see things different somehow since I've been sick. It's like when I was in the hospital in Philadelphia. When you're weak you seem to see things clearer. Maybe when I'm up and about I won't see them as clear as I do now."

She went on slowly, her gaze out of the window.

"I guess I must have been sort of crazy in my head when I came down here—I must have been doped up for a good while before I came. I want you to forget what happened that night. I guess I could get a lot of money out of Maisie Keith if I wanted to for what she's done, but the way I feel now I'm not going to try. She's a friend of yours and if you want to marry her I'll just step out of the way and let you. You'd better take me at my word and act quick. I'll do what I ought to do. I don't like her. I'll be hating her again pretty soon when I get strong enough to hate anybody. But I don't hate anybody now. I haven't got any hate in me and I wanted to tell you all this. I want you to draw up a paper for me to sign while I feel this way."

Peter took her hand and patted it gently.

"No, there'll be nothing for you to sign, Josie."

"Well, have it your own way. But you'd better make sure of me. You've been pretty fine to me and I didn't have sense enough to know it." She took his hand and kissed it. There were tears in her eyes—tears of weakness, perhaps, but they passed with Peter as tokens of penitence. She seemed suddenly to grow very tired, so Peter took her in his arms and put her to bed.

"Now go away," she said, petulantly, as though ashamed of her few fine moments. "I want to sleep."

The frankness of this confession gave Peter moments of serious thought. From all that he knew of her it was difficult to believe that her gentleness and charity were permanent. But he accepted her renunciation in good faith, aware that more than ever it was now his duty to make what he could of her good will and build upon it a friendly relationship in which he might help her back to contentment and some sort of reasonable attitude toward life. Whether this would be possible he did not know, but he meant to do what he could, relinquishing definitely the dreams that Tommy's visit had set whirling through his head.

He wrote Tommy a long letter telling her of this conversation and of his purpose to make a new effort to keep Josie in Red Bridge as long as she would consent to stay.

"Of course, I admit," he said, "that it is impossible for me to believe she will ever be happy in this place or with me and it's difficult to believe that her attitude is permanent. But as long as she will stay here I intend to do what I can for her. I could never live with her again. But I can try to give her my friendship and try to save her at least from the terrible life that she has lived in New York. I know sick-bed repentances are not to be trusted, but I must take her at her word. It's the only thing that I can do.

"There has been much time to think of your visit here and what it meant. But I know now that I'm doing what you would want me to do. Josie gains strength very slowly, but she gains. She is so thin and so frail, and so childlike lying in my big four-poster that it hardly seems possible she could have been the cause of so much trouble for herself and everybody else. The capacity for evil

seems to have passed out of her, like the fever, leaving her weak, helpless and bewildered in a world that she has ceased to understand. If, in my moments of weakness with you, I have ever thought of deserting her, that possibility has passed out of my mind. I've got to stand by her now, for she needs help more than ever, and she has no other resources anywhere.

"And so, my dear, our little mad dream—even of a spiritual marriage as you call it, is over. If you're coming down to the Wingates' again, as you promised, let it be soon for there are many things—quite harmless things that were left unsaid in your brief eventful visit to the island."

To this Tommy replied briefly, that she would come to Red Bridge the following week, signing herself

"The little old lady with the spit-curls."

2

It was no longer the disease that Josie had to fight, for the disease was conquered. More desperate if less dangerous was the long struggle for health, the repairing of tissues worn by months of careless self-indulgence and dissipation. Peter carried her to the lounge or her chair near the window in the afternoons and put her to bed when she grew tired. The fear of death that had been her obsession during the days following the fever was succeeded by the dulness and apathy of utter indifference. She was too tired even to be petulant, too weary even to comment upon the news of the day. There was no further renewal of her moment of confession and the most that she did in the way of conversation was a "yes" or "no," a nod of the

head, or, at the best, a faint smile of appreciation for Peter or Miss Jeffreys, the nurse. But Dr. Loomis, who had predicted, even after the crisis, a long siege, professed himself satisfied with progress and promised that in a month she would be able to go out.

Peter now went back to his work during the hours when the nurse was on duty and when Tommy came to Red Bridge for a few days managed to arrange to visit Wingate's house in the evenings after the patient had been put to bed. Tommy found Peter very tired and very thoughtful, but she seemed to have good spirits enough for them both. Fred Wingate, who had always been an outspoken creature, loyal to his friends and distrustful of their enemies, remarked quite brutally that it was a pity that Josie hadn't died. And he did the best he could for Tommy and Peter by going to bed early, leaving his daughter Mary to act as chaperon, a task that she chose to relinquish as soon as her father was safely between the sheets. For Mary, plain, sensible creature, was greatly sympathetic to Peter and Tommy's forbidden affection, finding in it, vicariously, the romance that she herself had been denied.

And so Peter and Tommy had the big studio on the hillside to themselves. But they were now more than ever impressed by the solemnity of their obligations to the sick woman and to each other, sitting in the two armchairs by the big north window thrown open to the stars, and conversing with calm circumspection upon the philosophical aspects of their unfortunate passion.

"There does really seem to be a law of compensation, doesn't there, Peter? You and I have everything in the world to make life desirable, I, money—you, talent and

success. It looks as though we already had all that was coming to us and that it isn't intended that we should have each other. But we've got to be satisfied."

"Not satisfied," Peter put in. "Stoical."

"The funny thing about it all is that you've infected me with your idealism. I've come to understand that you're right. Sometimes I even believe that I'm more convinced of your righteousness than you are yourself. You know—" she leaned back in her chair and gazed at a star that winked down at her benignantly, "you know, I was an awful rotter when I first met you, Peter. No. Let me speak. It's been in my mind for a long while. In those days I was very much the same sort of a girl that Josie Brant was. I think in some ways I was worse, because I'd had every opportunity, every kind of incentive to be better. That I wasn't exactly the same sort of a girl that Josie got to be was due to the accident of meeting you. I was reckless, satiated with pleasure, hunting new sensations. I was rather a magnificent sort of creature, gloating over my independence, intolerant of the thought of marriage, ready, as you said—I'll never forget the phrase—ready to 'sin splendidly.' Well, you prevented that by showing me Josie. It was a terrible picture to open my eyes with, but somehow it did it. It was like looking in a mirror at myself and seeing Josie instead. I *was* Josie—almost. How I hated myself for being made ridiculous! The queer part of the thing was that I didn't hate you too. But I didn't. There was a kind of benevolence about the way you took me in charge, as though you were a tall policeman taking home a small child that had lost its way. You know, I liked the calm way you went about it. I never owed anybody anything before the moment you sent Jack

Salazar out of my apartment. But I owed you—and I realized it—more than I could ever pay.”

“You’ve paid it, my dear—many times,” said Peter, soberly.

“Well,” she went on, “what I’m coming to is this—and it’s taken me a long while to see it. If you hadn’t happened along, I would have become just what Josie Brant has been—in a different class in life, of course, with money and luxury, the refinements of culture that put a gloss on sin and take away from it some of its ugliness and brutality—but the same, the very same. That’s true. There are women of my crowd who have gone that way—women like me who thought as I thought, that the new era for women had come, the day of the bachelor girl, of independence, of equality with men in all things. But it hadn’t, and it never will. There isn’t any new era. A lot of water has run under the bridge since the Middle Ages, but it won’t run upstream. Good Lord! What a fool I’ve been!”

“If you call yourself names,” Peter said with a laugh, “I shall kiss you.”

“A spiritual kiss.” She made a move with her lips and threw out her arms toward the stars. “There!” she said. “It’s done! How simple!” And then with delicate irony—“But it’s not worth while doing again. So I shan’t call myself names any more.”

There was a silence during which Peter leaned forward, staring out of the window. Tommy went on quietly.

“Josie is going to get well. Her death would have simplified matters for us. But I don’t think—yes, I’m sure that I haven’t wanted her to die. She has as much right to her life as you or I have. From now on, Peter, you and

I shouldn't see too much of each other. I'm beginning to realize that. And it hurts. But up there—" and she pointed to the heavens—"is a star that I've been watching."

"The Polar star," said Peter.

"The Polar star," she repeated. "Yes. It's well named. It's so cold, so pale, so aloof. But gentle, too. Well, I've appropriated it for *us*, Peter. God won't mind. There are so many of them. And that star is going to be kind to us both, it's going to be there for us both to look at at night when things bother, when pain comes, the pain of memory—"

She broke off suddenly and leaned forward, peering around the edge of the transom where Peter could not see.

"Why, what's that?"

Peter rose and they both walked to the window looking out. There was a dull glow, copper colored, above the trees and roofs of the houses below them.

"The furnaces at Smithville—" Peter said, immediately contradicting himself, "no, it's nearer."

Just then from the road outside came the sound of a youthful voice shouting "Fire!"

Peter straightened and stared eagerly.

"It's beyond the towpath," he muttered. "Brush—maybe— And yet it couldn't be that . . . Tommy!"

The same thought came to them both as Peter rushed through the house followed by Tommy. People were running down the hill.

"They say it's Randle's," Peter heard.

"I'm going," he cried.

"Wait—wait. The car. I'll drive you down. It's quicker."

She ran to Wingate's garage and backed her car out of the driveway, Peter leaped in and in a moment they were plunging down the hill, horn blowing, shearing their way through the foot passengers, who sprang aside to give them the road. There was no doubt now. As they crossed the bridge over the canal, the roof of Peter's studio was blazing brightly, and they had a glimpse of the main building, from the windows of which smoke was pouring.

"Of course, they've got her out," Peter was muttering. Tommy said nothing—taking the down grade at full speed.

The space between the house and sheds was as bright as in daylight. The shadows of a few figures leapt gigantic among the trees. A man running down the lane jumped to the running board of Tommy's car, shouting something unintelligible. But they had reached the place before the straggling crowd from the village which was streaming after them. In front of the house, several people screamed and gesticulated. A man dashed in at the door and came out almost at once, his arms over his face.

All of these things Peter took in during the brief dash from the lower bridge to the sheds. He could now make out the identity of the figures before the house—Martha, Miss Jeffreys, the nurse. Both were hysterical—Martha mad with excitement, Miss Jeffreys crying wildly to the man who had come defeated from the hallway.

Peter caught the nurse by the arm.

"Mrs. Randle!" he gasped.

"She's up there—on the floor—near the doorway of the bathroom. I tried to get her out. But I had to wake Martha. There wasn't time. . . ."

In the firelight Tommy's glance and Peter's flashed and

fused, burning with one thought. Peter read Tommy's meaning as he knew his own. Tommy told him to go while Peter was already running toward the front door, stripping off his coat. Aware instinctively that she would follow him, he waved her back and, wrapping his coat around his head dashed into the hallway and up the stairs. He stumbled on the burning treads, but managed to reach the landing, suffocated, his shirt-sleeve ablaze. But he beat out the flame and went on hands and knees, feeling his way, groping, toward the bathroom where he found Josie and caught her up into his arms, attempting to return. But at the door into the hall a blast of flame now beat him back. So he closed the door and retreated through bathroom and bedroom toward the back stairs. The upper door was closed but tongues of flame were leaping under it. The dry wood of the old building was crackling horribly.

The window then! There were no outbuildings and the ground toward the river was a sheer drop twenty feet among the rocks. Breathing with great difficulty, Peter planned quickly, blindly, leaving his unconscious burden, tearing the sheets and blankets from the bed and knotting them securely, tying them under Josie's arms and carrying her to the window. His strength, he knew, was failing him, but with an effort he raised Josie to the sill, taking a turn of his improvised rope around the heavy post of the bed.

As he appeared, the people below shouted encouragement and ran forward under the window. It was a fight for seconds of time, but he lowered away slowly, sweating and gasping for breath for his bursting lungs, aware of the splitting panels of the door behind him. He could see nothing. His eyes seemed to be burning in their

sockets, but the air from the window reviving him for a moment he managed to keep his hold of the sheet until the weight of his burden suddenly relaxed. He stumbled to the window and fell across the sill gasping for breath. He thought it extraordinary how clearly he was thinking of what he meant to do—with no strength to do it. So he just hung there, gasping for his breath, while the smoke poured over him in billows, illuminated by the flames that had burst in the door.

People below him were shouting, telling him not to jump. Jump! That was funny. He couldn't jump. His feet were like weights, chained to the floor. And God! the heat! With a sheer effort of will, he hauled himself by his arms up on the sill and clung. He would fall out in a moment, he knew, but even death there below among the rocks was better than this other death behind him—a cool death . . . anything better than this heat . . . this terrible heat that urged him to go. He must for a moment have lost consciousness, but clung desperately to the shutter hinge even then. Shouts—from a great distance in his ears—growing nearer . . . voices closer, strong hands grasping him as a tongue of flame shot over his head . . . then unconsciousness. . . .

3

It was Martha who knew where the ladder was—in the cellar which the fire hadn't touched—and they had managed to get it up to the bedroom window just in time. It was an old ladder but a long one, reaching the sill at a good angle and two strong young ex-service men climbed it and brought Peter down. But it was a close fight with

the flames. They laid Peter on the grass and threw water on his smoldering clothing.

When he came to consciousness, it was Tommy's face that he saw first. She was crying.

"Peter—Peter, dear—" she murmured. "You're all right?"

"Yes. I—I'm all right. And—and she—?"

"I don't know. She was unconscious. They've taken her to the house beyond the canal. Miss Jeffreys went with her."

"Is she—"

"I—don't know, Peter dear. I don't know."

"Well, I did what I could, Tommy. But it was hot as hell up there." His blackened lips twisted in a grin. "Funny," he muttered, whimsically, "if she'd die now after all that."

Peter had every right to his little irony, but Tommy regarded him soberly. She knew from the twitching of his face that he was suffering, but he gathered strength enough to get to his feet, while willing hands helped him to Tommy's car in which she drove him with one of the ex-service men to Wingate's.

He was not all right. In the light he looked burnt to a cinder, his hair was singed, his eyebrows gone, but the moisture of his eyes had providentially saved them. Wingate had cut the tatters of clothing from his body and was applying home remedies when the doctor arrived. Tommy awaited his decision anxiously, but was rewarded by the assurance that the percentage of blistered surface was well within the safety limit. As to his lungs, he did not know, but there seemed to be no sign of internal damage. He had given Peter a hypodermic to save him

from the pain, but Randle was strong—with a good heart and fine lungs. He would recover. Perhaps she could help with the nursing.

In the meanwhile, he sent Tommy to Smithville in her car to fetch a salve that he would order over the 'phone, and went back to the room where Peter lay, already partly stupefied by the morphia. Mary was preparing the bandages. Wingate rose from the bedside where he had been anxiously watching the patient.

"Do you think he'll do all right, Loomis?" Wingate asked as they moved into the next room.

"Oh, yes. If there's no inflammation or poison in the lungs. That was a fine performance, Wingate—from all that I hear."

Wingate grunted. "A damn-fool performance, if you ask me. Peter always was a damn fool. But risking his valuable life for a creature like that woman—"

"He risked it in vain," said Loomis, dryly.

"You mean that she. . . ."

The doctor nodded his head soberly.

CHAPTER XIX

CONCLUSION

PETER, still swathed in bandages, lay in the *chaise longue* on Wingate's porch, that overlooked the woods and river. From the carpenter shop beneath the studio came the cheerful sound of hammering, for Wingate was boxing some canvases to be shipped to New York. Mary's sewing machine hummed pleasantly in the adjoining room. And Tommy, still a visitor at Red Bridge, was reading aloud to Peter. From her room Mary Wingate glanced out at the pair on the porch smiling contentedly. Things were going quite to her liking. Peter Randle was getting well. All the village resounded with praise of his exploit and Mary, who was the purveyor of news from the sick room, had achieved an importance in the community second only to Peter himself.

Josie's funeral had been melancholy enough. She had no near relatives, so far as Peter knew, except the aunt who had formerly lived at the Milestown crossroads, but the church was comfortably filled by Peter's friends, Josie's acquaintances, and a considerable gathering of other persons from the village, both morbid and curious. The Reverend Clarence Snyder, pink and perspiring, conducted the services and the body was decently interred in the churchyard adjoining.

Peter had suffered a great deal, but now professed himself quite without pain. His left arm and thigh were badly blistered and he would carry to his grave the scars

of his adventure. He had, in more respects than one, passed through fire into safety and contentment. Bowls of roses and wild flowers here and there testified to the admiration of his neighbors and Fred Wingate and Mary had turned their house into a hospital with all the good will in the world.

A haze of heat hung over the river, for June in the Delaware Valley could be hot. There was a constant chord of buzzing insects and above it the pleasant familiar notes of the valley—the distant murmur of a train, a tinkle of bells from the pasture, voices, birds calling, the rustle of leaves in a vagrant breeze.

Peter grew drowsy. As Tommy paused in her reading, he put out his right hand and laid it over the page of the book. She looked up at him.

“Are you tired?” she asked.

“Not in the least,” he said with a smile. “But I’d much rather you talked to me.”

“I was hoping you might drop off into a nap.”

“That’s just the danger. And it’s all too good to waste in sleep.”

She laughed and put the book aside.

“What shall we talk about?”

“Us.”

“Wonderful pronoun!”

“I’ve got something to say to you, Tommy. Something important.”

“Yes?”

“I think, if you don’t mind, that I’d like you to marry me . . .!”

“Really?”

“That is, if you haven’t changed your mind. I’m rather

a wreck just now, but I suppose I'll come through all right."

He was delicious. Tommy let him talk.

"Of course, everything I had was destroyed. I've got to begin again. I'm a beggar, you know. It's funny that I never thought of your money before. But I've been thinking a lot about it lately—it worries me. When I had money I was such a rotten painter—"

"Perhaps, we'd better not marry after all," she said, demurely.

He stared at her, but she looked up at him.

"I mean," she went on, "if you're afraid of being a rotten painter again."

He caught her hand and held it tightly.

"Tommy," he urged, "why can't we forget how rich you are— Money stifles—too much of it. We could be very happy without it."

"All right," she said with a laugh. "I'll give it all away. Endow a home for idealists. Another for irresponsible spinsters."

"Please be serious."

"I am. And to show how serious I am I'll begin by endowing you and me. We'll rebuild the house and studio just as they were and at the bridge we'll put a sign— 'This way to Paradise.' And then. . ."

At this moment Fred Wingate, in his shirt sleeves, appeared and grinned at them from the doorway.

"Peter," he said, "I don't believe you're so much of a fool, after all."

(1)

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